

play

Exclusive first review!

Maximo

vs. Army of Zin

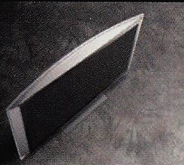
He's back, he's bold...he's still dead!

Capcom's knight in shining armor (and boxer shorts) returns!



Gear ///
70 inches of fun!

Sony's largest rear-projection TV is a stunner



Media ///
Hamill time!

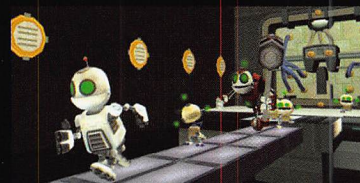
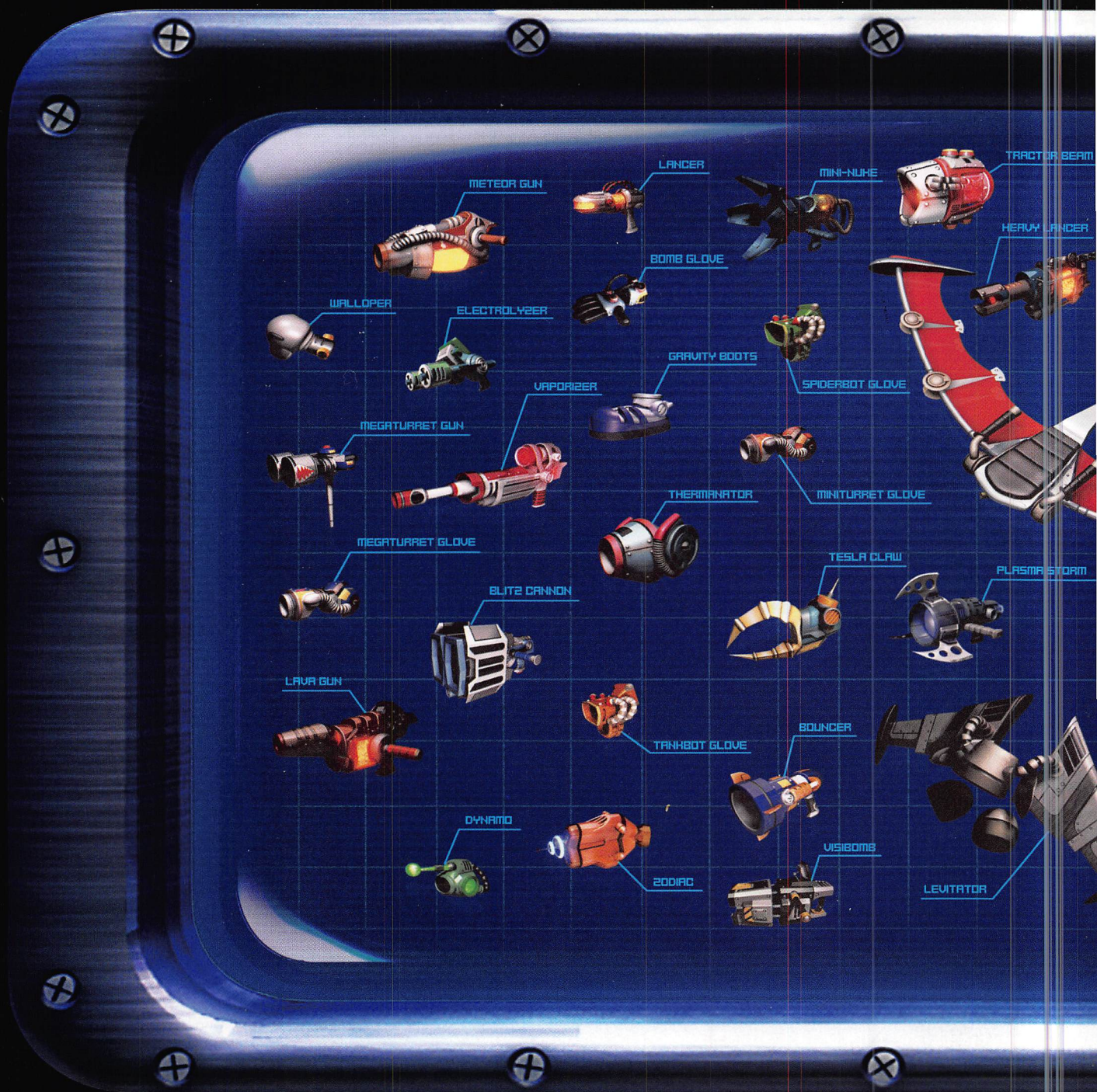
Mark Hamill's directorial debut is pure comic genius



Anime ///
It's a Madhouse!

FUNimation's Kiddy Grade makes its series debut!





EENIE, MEENIE, MINEY, BOOM.

They're back. And they're itching for action. With tons of planets to conquer in a whole new gigantic galaxy, you better believe Ratchet & Clank are gonna sink their teeth into some destruction. Ummm, destruction. With weapon upgrades, mods, armor and the ability for Ratchet to get stronger and smarter as the game goes on, this could get uglier than The Grandmas In Bikinis Calendar after-party. Speaking of parties, there's also hoverbike racing, space combat and gladiator arenas. As far as weapons and gadgets go, Ratchet & Clank are stacked with over 50 new ones, along with unlockable upgrades, so by the end of the journey, you'll go through more weapons and gadgets than a hungry fat man will go through chicken wings at lunch. Lock and load, baby, lock and load. www.us.playstation.com



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PLAY IN OURS.



Mild Violence

PlayStation 2



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PlayStation 2

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BENDING PUZZLES

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OFFICIAL GAME
BASED ON THE LITERARY WORKS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN

WELCOME TO MIDDLE-EARTH™

thehobbit.sierra.com

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Spike this!



I always took it for granted that by the time gaming finally reached the point of being substantial enough for a well-publicized TV awards show that we'd have come far enough as an industry (and cultural mainstay) to show it as an

artistic, oftentimes fulfilling endeavor, able to reach a place filmed entertainment can't, through interactive fantasy, adventure, sports, role playing, etc., while honoring those individuals who helped get us here. Imagine how gratifying it would be to see treks like ActRaiser, the great Marios, Zeldas, Final Fantasys, LandStalkers and Phantasy Stars of the world solemnly sent up as the catalyst for games like FF X-2, Wind Waker, Metroid Prime and all of the other fantastic epics we're currently enjoying. Not that the other, more mainstream, side of gaming is any less deserving—honor that too; I'd like to see the entire spectrum represented and, moreover, respected.

I speak, of course, of the recent "Spike TV Video Game Awards" and the gratuitous, demeaning face it painted on gaming kind. Apparently, in their minds, gaming is so insignificant as a medium that the only way to get people to watch was by putting on a T&A show/concert where a couple of awards broke out—no nominees included. No behind-the-scenes or making-of vignettes to show what goes in to crafting a great game, no real celebration of the actual experience, no producers, artists, modelers, game musicians or genres honored...and not a single mention of gaming's past or the people and publishers who got us here. Just scant categories serving obviously skewed results. Not to take anything away from the winners—most of whom were deserving of an award—it's the context that bears investigation. Def Jam for best music? We have symphony orchestras and people like Michiru Yamane arranging audible bliss, and licensed hip-hop and rap for a wrestling game gets top honors? At least pay homage through a nomination process.

From the categories themselves (and lack thereof) to the embarrassing charade at the winners' tables (bet that'd go over well at the Golden Globes), the VGAs looked more like an adult version of Nickelodeon's Slimetime Live than any awards show I've ever seen. I like David Spade, but he definitely gave the impression he was there for reasons

other than video games. In fact, he did a good job of showing how beneath him the night was—and rightfully so; it would have been beneath Gary Coleman had he hosted. Maybe next year they'll get Carrot Top. I was on the fence about not attending until they shot the game-of-the-year award out so fast I could barely recognize it was Madden 2004 (to which I exclaimed, "Madden 2004!?!"). Not to take anything away from EA, but that wasn't even the best football game of the year. I knew paint had been smoked. After a handful of commercial breaks and painful omissions, I could only go back to playing Armed & Dangerous, pretending all of my targets were Spike TV executives.

I wasn't aware that gaming was all about ghetto speak, DJs, screaming teenage groupies and closet geeks considered so socially challenged they serve as little more than fodder for a word from our sponsors. After 15 years, you'd think I'd have caught wind of that; my thanks to Spike for clarifying. Granted, there's certainly a stereotype to send up here, but only if it is followed by the reality that gaming crossed over long ago. And as for the rap and hip-hop side of the equation, both are respected elements of music and pop culture that have taken a shine to gaming for sure; but is it the face we want, given what's landed us here? I don't think so. In fact, I would venture to say that those artists are more interested in Halo 2 than Madden 2005. Spike just got it wrong—period.

A real opportunity slipped by with this much-hyped broadcast that, in the end, made gaming out to be just as the naysayers perceive it—juvenile and trashy—and chances are, since money talks (the advertisers certainly bought it), we'll have to stomach it until someone squashes it. Now would be a good time to call your cable company and beg for G4. And to anyone else who's listening and wants to do this right...we're available. As for Spike TV, may Gary the Rat die under your floorboards.

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PlayStation 2



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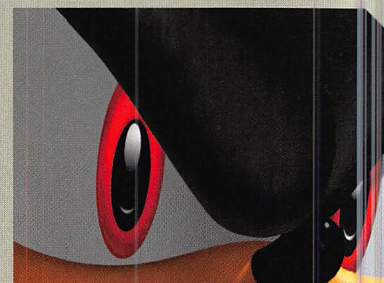
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Final Fantasy XII



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Sonic Heroes



060

R: Racing Evolution + Interview



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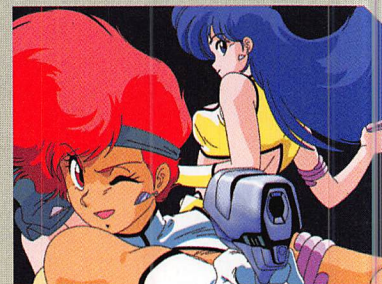
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Sony debuts massive new LCD rear projection XBR

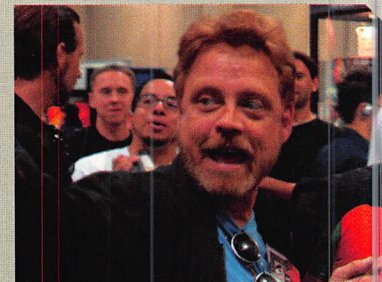
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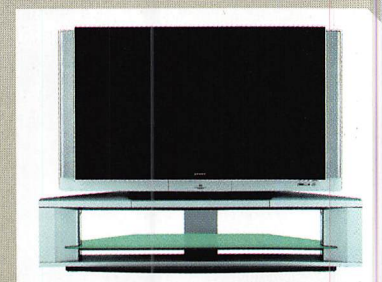
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Original Dirty Pair



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Interview: Mark Hamill



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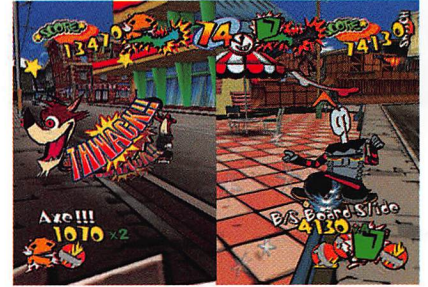
There are some individuals who would prefer that we not
publish a game like Go! Go! Hypergrind.
Let them vent.

"Do you like skating? If you do then Go! Go! Hypergrind should rocket to the top of your "Must buy" list. You won't be disappointed."
- Nintendophiles

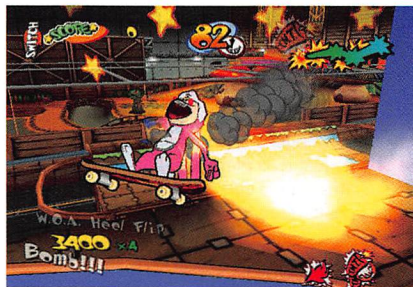


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- NintendoInsider.com



Powerful graphics engine allows for real-time character deformation. The wacky, cel-shaded skateboarders can be subjected to numerous humiliations, such as being set on fire, flattened and covered in caca!

"...absolutely insane..." -
GamesAreFun.com



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Letter of the month

Hey play,

After spending my fair share of time bouncing between gaming publications, gaming websites and message forums, I've noticed a rather unpleasant smell about. It conjures up the image of porcine, slaving fanboys armed with keyboards and an axe to grind. It's jaded cynicism, and it's available at a store near you.

Why is it that so many "professional gamers" seem no more intelligent or discerning than Buttplugger009 from elitist gamers.com? Frankly, I'm tired of getting a "ho-hum" reaction every time a platformer comes out (Voodoo Vince, Blinx, etc.). Is it really that rough playing video games for a living? If so, then I volunteer to bear their cross from now on.

What really baffles me is when these "hardcore gamers" start trotting out comments like "rehash" or "lack of innovation." To me, this is a knee-jerk reaction, a way of dismissing a game without really considering it. It's the type of thing they put in when they don't want to say something that might be construed as "thought-provoking" or "interesting." And really, this mentality is the antithesis of hardcore. After all, anyone who's been playing games for any appreciable length of time knows that games rarely innovate on a grand scale. Let's be honest: if we only bought truly innovative games, our collections would be pretty small. One, maybe two games per genre; that's it. Very much the polar opposite of hardcore.

I recently picked up a copy of _____ (and yes, I know that's my own damn fault), and was perplexed about what I saw. There were some obvious flaws on the Warhammer FPS, stating that for a new game, it looked and played like something that came out in 1993. Yeah, I remember the glut—the GLUT—of beautiful, high-res shooters back in 1993. You couldn't swing a dead cat without knocking dozens of 'em off the shelves. But what really did me in was the treatment of anything without guns and swearing. Sure, platformers are rehashes, but GTA? No, that's fresh as a daisy! Screw Mega Man X7, forget about Vince, and Kirby Air Ride? Child's play, now

that we can run over pedestrians...again. Not that I would dare dream of dissing GTA, but it all seems a bit contradictory to me.

Now, I'm sure that burnout plays a key factor in these types of dismissive reviews, but it really isn't fair to either the reader or the developers behind these efforts. I can only imagine the frustration of working on a game for a year and a half, putting in insane hours and fighting the publisher to get what you want, and then sending it out to the press who'll say, "yawn, put in GTA." And as a reader, it's insulting. Nobody's going to waste time reading a review of a game that doesn't interest them, and therefore

"Why is it that so many 'professional gamers' seem no more intelligent or discerning than Buttplugger009 from elitist gamers.com?"

if the reviewer says, "Another FPS? Who cares?" then they've forgotten about their readership. So they fail on all counts.

I've been playing games since 1984, when my parents dusted off their old Atari 2600 and let me have a go at Moon Patrol. Since then, I've never stopped. So, after downing games by the hundreds, I know that burnout is bullsh*t. If anything, I've gained an appreciation for the finer details of a good game. I don't care how many times a double jump's been used before Ratchet & Clank, I'm still glad to have it in there. Melee combat in a FPS is nothing new, but its implementation in Halo makes the game immeasurably better. I could go on all night, but do I really need to continue? This mentality, if nothing else, has managed to make me appreciate the hard work you guys do down at play. It's good to know that you haven't lost your love for games after all these years.

Take it easy,
Zach

X marks the glitch

I'm 24 and a gamer and your magazine is my companion guide to my favorite

hobby. Being a fan of the GTA series, I picked up the double pack for Xbox when it released recently. I've already played through both games on the PS2 but figured it would be worth the money to have the "finest version of one of the finest games around." Plus, that shiny platinum/chrome box looked mighty inviting. I played a little GTA 3 and was quite pleased with what I saw. It was a definite improvement. The trouble began when I popped in Vice City and got the first disk read error. But I was not disheartened. I had seen this before. A couple of restarts and I would be on my way. But once I got the game

up and running, there were surprisingly notable flaws: frame rate skipping, audio skipping...things that are, for lack of a euphemism, unacceptable, which got me thinking. Why? Is it Rockstar's fault? Is it Microsoft's? Do I just have a faulty Xbox? My girlfriend often jokingly asks why my Xbox is "such a broken piece of junk?" My Xbox is very particular. Morrowind, Enclave and KOTOR—all games that I love and could've gone down in my personal gaming history, were it not for the regular doses of disk reads and freezes. And now VC can join that sad list of "could've beens." But it isn't just my Xbox, because the message boards at Gamefaqs are loaded with people complaining of the same things. So I don't know what to make of it, but I do know I expected more. Being 24, it isn't as if I have money to throw around. It's hard to feel like your money's well spent when the product, whether it's the hardware or the software, is broken. And I know I'm not the only one. Where's the quality control?

Broseybros

My Xbox gave me a "disc must be dirty or damaged" error three hours into Armed & Dangerous last night after hacking the music like an old licorice pizza. Plus, we're getting

more and more of these inquiries. We'll get to the bottom of it.

Go Live

I am disappointed to see that the online functionality of the PS2 version was not even slightly mentioned (nor hinted) on the reviews of Need for Speed Underground and Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. Conspiracy? I hope not. A mistake on the reviewer's behalf? Now that's a scary thought. I believe the same thing happened a couple of months back on the new Tiger Woods game and SSX3. If I were to just read play magazine, I would have missed the information. When a game is multi-formatted, I think it's best to stick a review in the magazine separately if only one of the versions is tested. If not, it's okay to slap on there that the game has three versions but please specify the differences. The only things mentioned usually are the graphical difference. And that is fine, just continue with that trend and identify all the differences applied. I own all the consoles and I want to make sure I get the best version of a game.

Bard-N

We'll agree with you that more mention needs to be made of a game's online components, but given our limited space for editorial, sometimes we aren't able to describe something that we feel may not ultimately affect the score of the game. With the next issue of play, we're adding an "online badge" to clarify if a game is ready to go live on the 'net.

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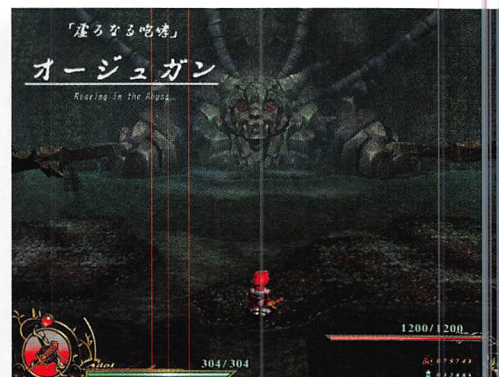
Return to Ys

Fantastic news from the Konami camp



As Konami continue to expand their worldwide market share by actively seeking out and developing major anime and movie content, they've obtained the rights to none other than Ys—one of gaming's most legendary action-role-playing series—and are expanding and enhancing the recently released Ys VI: The Ark of Napishtim (for Japanese PC) for a worldwide winter 2004 release on console. The series, from Japan's Nihon Falcom, has been around since 1987, although it's most famous for launching the first CD-based game system, the TurboGrafx CD, alongside the

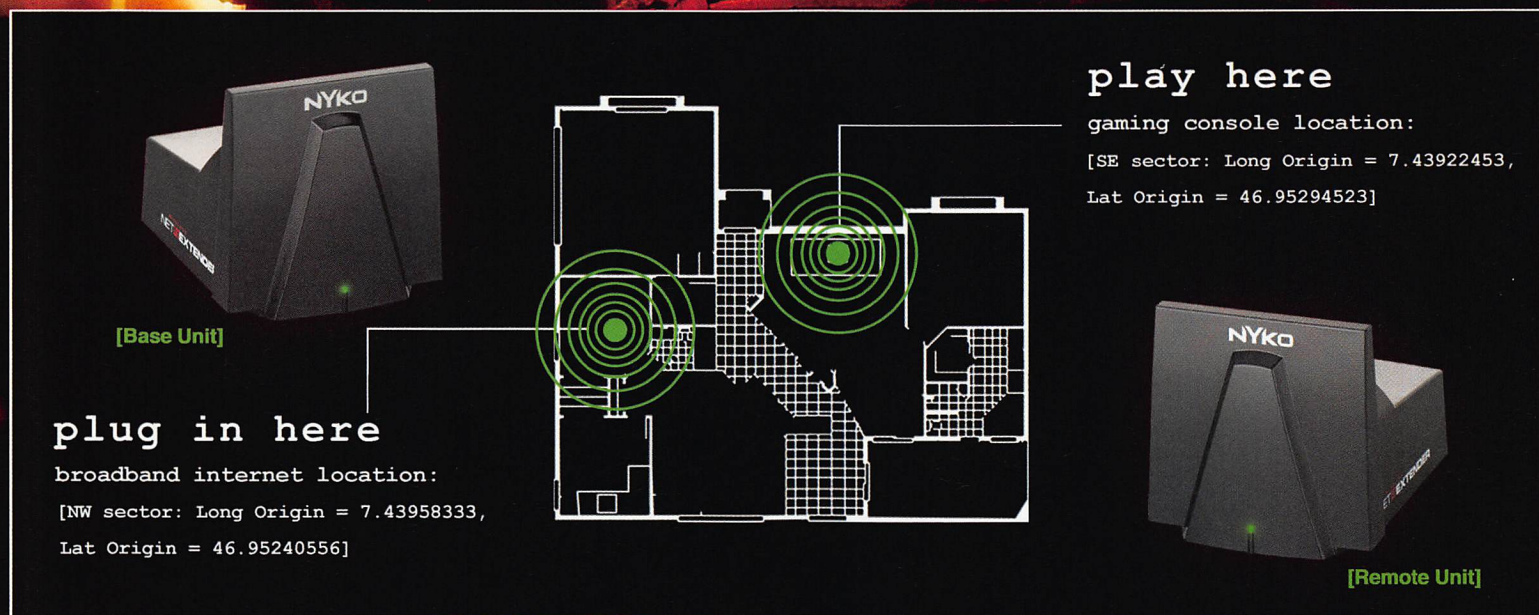
world's first console Street Fighter...pretty good company. The original Ys, while graphically somewhat wanting, featured what remains one of the all-time best video game scores ever (by then-guru Yuzo Koshiro) and a quirky ramming system for overworld attacks as Adol Christian fought to rid Ys (the final utopia) of evil. There have been six Ys games to date (appearing on PC, Famicom, TurboGrafx CD, SNES and PlayStation and more), not counting ports and remakes, and now the legacy will live on in some of the most competent hands in all of gaming.



Ys VI: The Ark of Napishtim, plays out in similar action-RPG style, set on a deserted island dressed in beautifully rendered 3D graphics that, gratefully, appear hand drawn. Konami will use its advanced technology to further enhance the graphics, improve the controls and expand the scenario by adding new maps, enemies and missions in an effort to create the most interesting, most visually appealing and most and expansive Ys game to date. Together with Suikoden, Konami is on their way to an RPG dynasty. Now, if they'd only release Policenauts on GBA....

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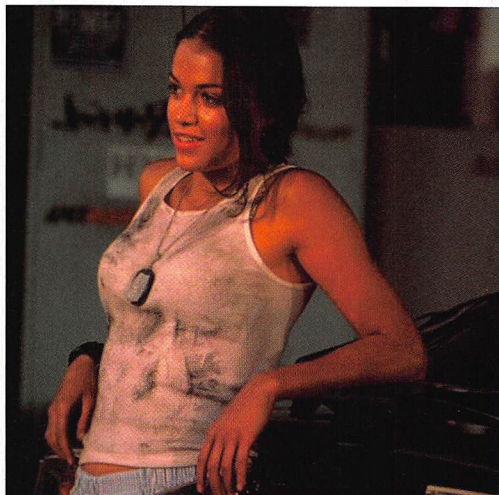


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Drive Her

As is the status quo of late, if you build it they will come—"it" being a real-world video game having to do with either cars or guns (or both) and "they" being celebrities crazy enough to risk being modeled as any number of polygonal eyesores that usually look carved from a bar of soap. The latest such endeavor involves (surprise) *Driver 3*, scheduled for release in spring 2004, starring Michael Madsen, Ving Rhames, Mickey Rourke and Michelle Rodriguez. Each will play a lead role in the third installment of the gritty, crime-fighting game series being developed by Atari's Reflections Interactive for the PlayStation 2 and Xbox.

Dreamcast: Gone But Not Forgotten

Dreamcast-Petition.com (now dreamcastscene.com), the world's biggest DC initiative, has been circulating an international petition against the discontinuation of Dreamcast software for some time, and now they've gone live. The new name, layout and content is meant to "symbolize the unity of the programming scene," offering gamers and fans of the Dreamcast alike a place to call their own, furthering the development of new hardware devices and acting as a worldwide brand for publishing new Dreamcast software. The group's partner, Lik-Sang, will sell the hardware and software in the hopes of establishing a new Dreamcast community.



This Space For Rent...

If you saw our news item a few issues back (*Games on the fly*, Oct. 2003), then you already know that the latest video game releases are but a few mouse clicks away. Thanks to the advent of purchasing over the Internet, game rentals have become easier than ever as new services continue to emerge, offering varying degrees of rental bliss. Their duty: to keep you knee-deep in the games you want while offering a sweet deal should you decide somewhere down the road to make a given selection your own. We thought we'd drop in to see how things are shaping up. Most sites offer a simple interface with simple rules: one to five games at a time, prices from \$13.95 per month and up, no late fees ever, free shipping within 2-4 days along with pre-paid returns, a buy-it plan and a free 10-day trial. It's as easy as assembling a queue of your most-wanted and then waiting for the postman to hand-deliver cycles of games like your own personal gopher. Of the primary sites out there—GameFly, TriggerFingers, deepshark, RedOctane and GoVoJo (two of which are badly in need of new homepage happy kids)—the biggest difference seemed

to be selection outside of the obvious new releases and comprehensive libraries for Xbox, PS2 and GameCube platforms. TriggerFingers offers console rental, PlayStation and GBA; GameFly also has GBA (along with the most polished front end); and RedOctane has Dreamcast, PS One and even anime. The anime list is lacking to a point of near uselessness, however, and their new release list in serious need of an update (*Wolverine* and *Pro Race Driver*...not new), but they offer pretty much every Dreamcast title you can possibly imagine, which is cool for the 10 people left who care that don't already own every title. Still, it bears mention. We like TriggerFingers and RedOctane for depth and GameFly for ease of use/polish. Given the sorry state of game retail at "superstores," where limited inventory is either under lock and key and/or crammed in an aisle stuffed with double-wide plastic shopping carts, these are services well worth checking out. A revolving-door new-game delivery system can be a huge asset, although the real test ultimately lies in availability and reliability. Getting AAA games to a growing consumer base could prove the bottleneck in this otherwise promising new delivery system. As usual, your comments are welcome.

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New Nintendo Hardware

New Nintendo hardware will be on display at the 2004 E3, the company revealed amidst its financial report on the first half of their fiscal year ending Sept. 30. No details were given about the new hardware other than that it will not be a handheld gaming machine, and that, according to company representatives, the new hardware would be highly innovative. Whether this hardware could be the successor to the GameCube, a peripheral, or something altogether new is still speculative. In addition to the new hardware announcement, the fiscal report revealed a \$26.2 million loss for the period—the first time Nintendo has had a loss since 1962—but Nintendo expects to be back in the green once the fiscal year fully closes, on Mar. 31, 2004, boosted by holiday GameCube sales. The reduced GameCube price—and increased sales that accompanied it—didn't occur until October and won't be felt until the next financial report.

Hear the Fantasy

Square Enix has launched a new Final Fantasy radio station exclusively on America Online's Radio Network. The new station features 200 tracks from the Final Fantasy games, available for listeners on Radio@AOL, Radio@AOL for Broadband and Radio@Netscape under the Soundtracks & More category. FFR is the first such radio station on the Radio@AOL Network dedicated to a single video game franchise and is available to all AOL members and fans on the web, running through April 2004. The station is home to the complete score of Final Fantasy XI and samplings from games such as FFXVII, FFXVIII, FFX and FFX.

3D Ages: It's a Conspiracy

Great news for fans of classic Sega games—Conspiracy Entertainment have announced that they, along with business/licensing partner Constant Entertainment, will be bringing 14 titles from Sega's 3D Ages series to North America as well as Europe. The initial five titles, to be released in the first quarter of 2004, will be Golden Axe, Space Harrier, Fantasy Zone, Monaco GP and Phantasy Star, all somewhat updated for modern technology. At this time, Conspiracy hasn't decided whether the titles will be released separately or in a collection, but if the games are released individually, they will likely be value priced. Other games in the series, potentially Columns, Afterburner, Outrun, Decathlete,

Alien Syndrome, Bonanza Bros., Tant-R and more, are scheduled to follow, although as of press time, these games had not yet been released in Japan, nor had an estimated U.S. release date been set. No decision has yet been made on future games such as Streets of Rage and Phantasy Star IV. Although the 3D Ages games are all for the PlayStation 2 in Japan, Conspiracy would not officially confirm what platform they will appear on in North America, and the games could potentially shift to GameCube or Xbox if approval difficulties arise with Sony, as has been all too common lately. Regardless, Sega fans and classic gaming enthusiasts alike have a lot of games to be excited about.



Legendary Offer



What could be better than getting a free Legend of Zelda game? Easy: four free Legend of Zelda games. When Nintendo finally fessed up this past November that The Legend of Zelda: Collector's Edition (see our review this issue) was indeed on its way to GameCube, they also revealed that the only way to get the game was to obtain it for free—either bundled with a new GameCube system as was previously planned, or, for current Cube owners, get it through other means, like receiving it as a bonus when you buy and register two select games, the eligible titles being Mario Kart: Double Dash!!, Mario Party 5, Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga or 1080° Avalanche. The collection includes The Legend of Zelda (NES, 1987), Zelda II: The Adventure of Link (NES, 1988), The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (N64, 1998), The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask (N64, 2000), a demo of The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker and background on the Zelda series. More information about the deal can be found at <http://www.nintendo.com/zeldaclassic>.

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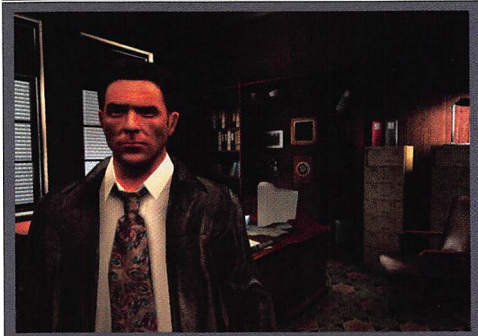
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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Max Payne 2 <i>rockstar / xbox, ps2</i>
02	Final Fantasy X-2 <i>square enix / ps2</i>
03	The Sims: Bustin' Out <i>ea / xbox, gc, ps2, gba</i>
04	Manhunt <i>rockstar / ps2</i>
05	Armed & Dangerous <i>lucasarts / xbox</i>
06	FIFA Soccer 2004 <i>ea / xbox, gc, ps2</i>
07	Medal of Honor: Rising Sun <i>ea / xbox, gc, ps2</i>
08	Need for Speed Underground <i>ea / xbox, gc, ps2</i>
09	True Crime: Streets of LA <i>activision / xbox, gc, ps2</i>
10	Mario Kart: Double Dash!! <i>nintendo / gc</i>



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Oct. Game Sales

01	NBA Live 2004 <i>ea / ps2</i>
02	Jak II <i>sony / ps2</i>
03	Madden NFL 2004 <i>ea / ps2</i>
04	Super Mario Advance 4: SMB3 <i>nintendo / gba</i>
05	WWE SmackDown! HCTP <i>thq / ps2</i>
06	Tony Hawk's Underground <i>activision / ps2</i>
07	Star Wars: RS III: Rebel Strike <i>lucasarts / gc</i>
08	Tiger Woods PGA 2004 <i>ea / ps2</i>
09	NBA Live 2004 <i>ea / xbox</i>
10	Viewtiful Joe <i>capcom / gc</i>



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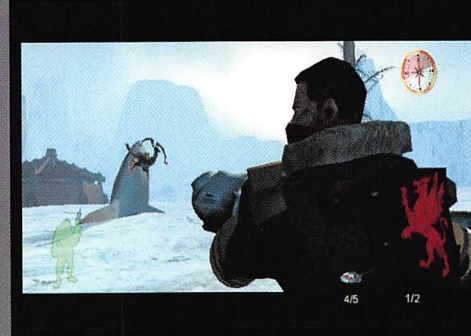
01	Final Fantasy XII <i>square enix / ps2</i>
02	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater <i>konami / ps2</i>
03	Ninja Gaiden <i>tecmo / xb</i>
04	Gradius V <i>konami / ps2</i>
05	Hyper Street Fighter II <i>capcom / ps2</i>



Dave Halverson

editor in chief

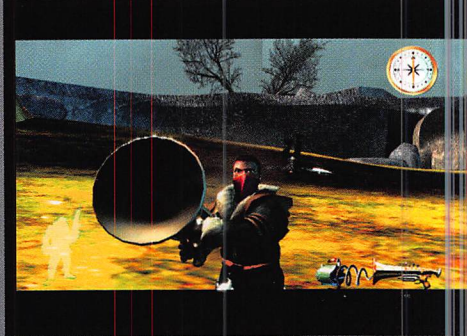
01	Armed & Dangerous <i>lucasarts / xb</i>
02	Maximo Vs. Army of Zin <i>capcom / ps2</i>
03	Final Fantasy X-2 <i>square enix / ps2</i>
04	Sonic Heroes <i>sega / gc</i>
05	Nightshade <i>sega / ps2</i>



Brady Fiechter

executive editor

01	Armed & Dangerous <i>lucasarts / xb</i>
02	Legacy of Kain: Defiance <i>eldos / xb</i>
03	Mario Kart: Double Dash!! <i>nintendo / gc</i>
04	Deus Ex: Invisible War <i>eldos / xb</i>
05	R: Racing Evolution <i>namco / xb</i>



Chris Hoffman

some editor

01	Final Fantasy X-2 <i>square enix / ps2</i>
02	Mario Kart: Double Dash!! <i>nintendo / gc</i>
03	Legend of Zelda: Collector's Edition <i>nintendo / gc</i>
04	WWE SmackDown! HCTP <i>thq / ps2</i>
05	Double Dragon Advance <i>atlus / gba</i>

Michael Hobbs

art director

01	Final Fantasy XI <i>square enix / pc</i>
02	Mario Kart: Double Dash!! <i>nintendo / gc</i>
03	Final Fantasy X-2 <i>square enix / ps2</i>
04	R: Racing Evolution <i>namco / xb</i>
05	Castlevania: Lament of Innocence <i>konami / ps2</i>

Nelson Lui

associate art director

01	Final Fantasy X-2 <i>square enix / ps2</i>
02	Mario Kart: Double Dash!! <i>nintendo / gc</i>
03	R: Racing Evolution <i>namco / xb</i>
04	Dynasty Warriors 4: Xtreme Legends <i>koel / ps2</i>
05	Mario Party 5 <i>nintendo / gc</i>



I'm not a diva, but I play one on TV.

Tinker (Tink)

Tink wears her goggles

play games



17 August '02

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MAXIMO vs. ARMY OF ZIN

DEATH BECOMES HIM

Less than two years after Maximo's exultant debut, here we are headlong into the sequel—Maximo vs. Army of Zin. Maximo: Ghosts to Glory was somewhat of a revelation, having burst onto the scene with a U.S. birthright—the first project brought to fruition by Capcom Digital Studios, stationed right here in the Golden State, home to wildfires, flash floods, fake boobs and the world's first action star come governor. Utilizing character designs from one of Japan's most renowned character artists, *Famitsu* (Japan's leading game publication since forever) cover guru Susumu Matsushita and a U.S. production team with a keen eye for the platforming guy, a new brand was born, half riding on Capcom's legendary Ghouls 'n Ghosts coattails and half on its own. Suffice to say, the world (and more importantly Capcom Japan) was impressed enough to green-flag a sequel, sending most of the original team back to the drawing board, data in hand, to infuse their poster child for

stylish undies with more of what gamers liked and none of what they didn't—the results of which are now contained in this exclusive review.

To give you an idea of where I'm coming from (unbridled enthusiasm notwithstanding), Ghosts 'n Goblins, Ghouls 'n Ghosts, and especially Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts were all religious experiences for me through the years. Only Castlevania stands before G&G in my franchise top five. The thought of the series going anywhere near 3D turned my stomach when it was first announced, but between Matsushita doing the art, Tommy Tallarico the music and old-school sympathetic Capcom alumni the rest, the first game won me over in a big way. Like many, the save/warp system, length (or lack thereof) and bosses had issues, but otherwise I fell in love with Capcom platforming all over again.

Where Ghosts to Glory served the old-school platformer in me, Army of Zin now ostensibly moves the genre further into the modern gaming age by becoming a jack of many trades within the confines of one extremely nuanced action-platformer. Governed by far more than the play mechanics that made the first so sticky, Zin celebrates every component of the sum of its parts: platforming, fighting, exploration, storytelling and most of all evolving the character in step with the rigors of the game. Never has a game sent me so vehemently in search of every last collectible (in this case, Koins), lusting after upgrades with unabashed desperation.

The way they've integrated item management into the action provides a gameplay balance that is quite unlike anything in the category because it ties in to the action so profoundly. Army of Zin is impeccably thought through. On

your way to beefing up Maximo's inventory, three elements factor into the equation: collecting Koins and treasure, saving the villagers and vendors key to finding and purchasing necessary items, and then buying the right stuff from a quiver of goodies you most desperately need. Right off the bat, you gotta have the Midas Aura (used for sucking in far-off treasure, thereby saving you from losing lives platforming your arse off to get them) and Treasure Seeker Boxers (the controller shakes around buried treasure), because they're the key to finding more chests and more money. But purchasing them means no weapon or move upgrade for a spell, although the enemies, a Maximo-hating horde of clockwork nightmares, may really be kicking your ass...and so it goes. Moreover, Maximo wields both hammer and sword this time out and needs to buy separate upgrades for each, further affecting the consequences of each purchase...not to mention Grim. Beefing up your soul meter prolongs his use (just an L press away), and he's as invincible as he is deadly—most handy for finishing off the game's bosses, which are as formidable a group as I've met this year. Adding further to the new, more adventurous feel, Army of Zin is also loaded with platforming puzzles (some wicked to the core), hidden areas galore and a network of keys and chests that'll have you climbing the walls to attain master status on every level.

In order to avoid any of these factors becoming overpowering, Zin is generously laden with sympathy armor (fighting in boxers, Maximo will often pop a suit out of a fallen Zin ghoul), chests to pillage and the mettle to take a few hits before revealing Maximo's spiffy skivvies. The cleverly guised "dynamic difficulty" is hard to spot, but it always has your back to a degree. In Ghosts to Glory, I



"ARMY OF ZIN NOW OSTENSIBLY MOVES THE GENRE FURTHER



spent half the game in shorts and rarely saw the gold armor, while in Zin, I'm golden much of the time—and gratefully so, seeing as how Zin's army is the most sundry bunch of robo-freaks I think I've ever come in contact with. Fighting the enemy in *Army of Zin* is a huge part of the fun, thanks to impeccable design, flawless placement, AI that keeps you cemented to the cause and a measure of diversity from stage to stage that keeps you guessing...right up to the point they pull out all the stops and begin attacking in hordes. At that point, pray your Maximo is up to snuff, else suffer their wrath. And I thought Zin would be too easy. Certain Ghosts trademarks have seeped into the mix as well, like the crows, flying gargoyles that drove you crazy (now mechanized) and those nasty barking chests. Between dealing with Zin's army, the environmental hazards and the bosses, the action in *Army of Zin* is well heated and 100 percent impossible to put down...plus Tinker needs you, and she's way hot.

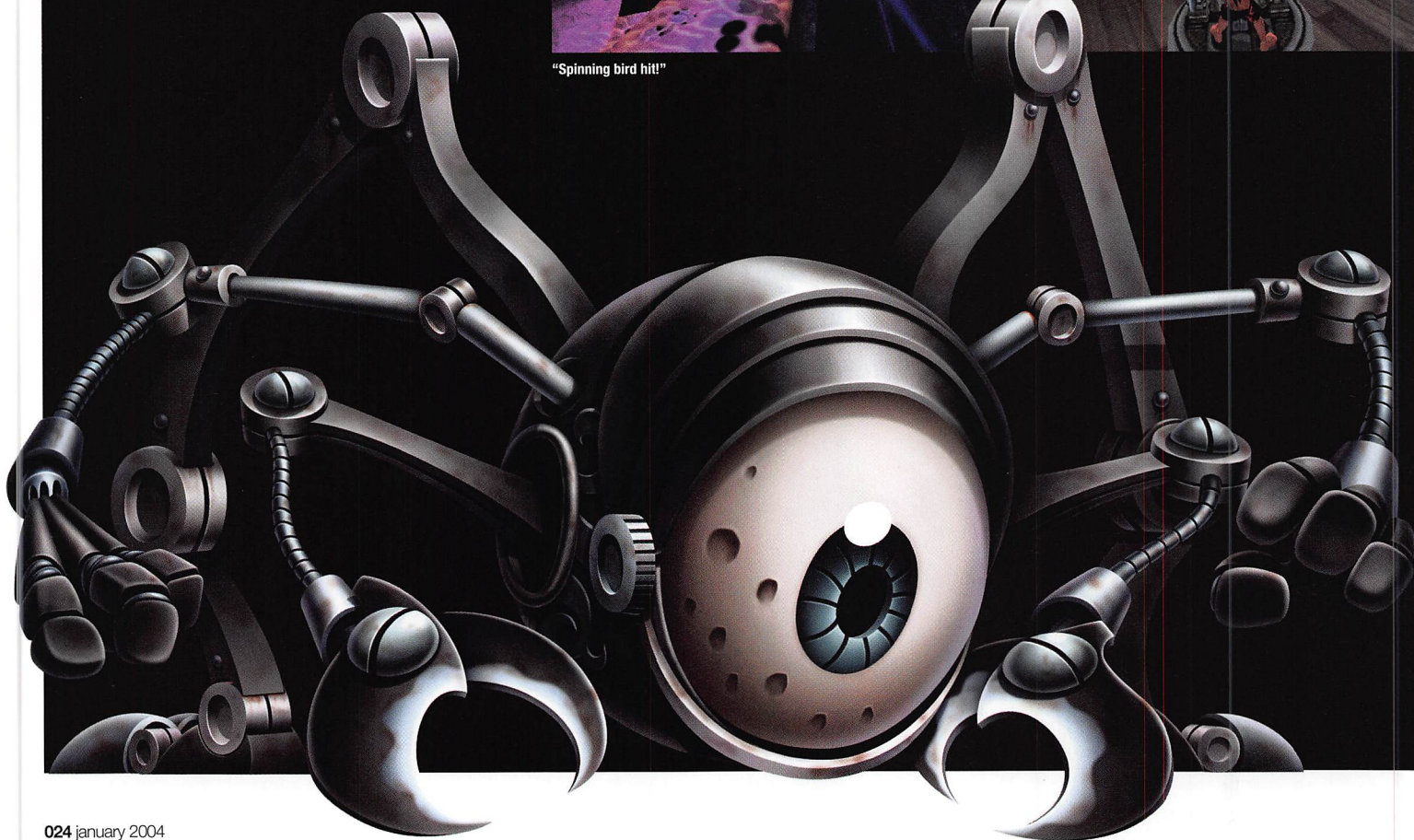
Creating the look for *Army of Zin*, the team has chosen perhaps the most effective and hauntingly beautiful choice of colors and hues I've seen in a PS2 game. Burnt orange and auburn skies, purplish brown caverns, misty pinks and watery blues—the contrast between levels makes you hunger for the next like so many Neo Geo games of old, and the art, well, the art is simply without compare. If you can find enemies and ancillary characters this well formed amidst areas as well laid on PS2, please let me know. Matsushita is all over this game, and does it ever make the difference.

Tying it all together, no Capcom creep show would be complete without a soundtrack to heighten the experience, and once again Tommy T. has risen to the occasion. From soaring overtures to playful melodies, Maximo's music fits as well as his boxer shorts. Oh, and this is still the best double jump in the business. Let us not forget the power and importance of the double jump.

To say Capcom is on a roll of late or the true defender of gaming proper would be an understatement. Considering in 2003 alone they've provided blistering arcade-style action with *Chaos Legion* and *Devil May Cry 2* (sorry, still love it), raised the bar on 2D action with *Viewtiful Joe*, fashioned perhaps



"Spinning bird hit!"



the best action-shooter ever in P.N. 03 (the year's most misunderstood game), continued to develop adventure horror with Resident Evil: Dead Aim and stuck by Mega Man with a pile of console and GBA games, I'd say they're, without question, sitting on the Mt. Olympus of third parties. All that's left now is to bring back Bionic Commando and make me a Street Fighter II action game... In the meantime, I'll be sucking up treasure and mastering Maximo vs. Army of Zin. **Dave Halverson** **A**

System: Playstation 2
Developer: Capcom Studio 8
Publisher: Capcom
Available: January



BOXER REBELLION



01



02



03



04



05

01) Armored boxers: Collect a fourth armor while wearing these to gain more health and golden armor. 02) Boxers of Burning Vigor: Recharge and regenerate your super meter while unarmed. 03) Heart Boxers: Given to Maximo by his love, Sophia (aahhh). 04) Magic Pow Boxers: The super meter recharges faster while wearing these stylish shorts. 05) Treasure Seeker Boxers: Vibrates the controller to detect nearby buried treasure.



Interviews >>

Mark Rodgers / Producer, Maximo vs. Army of Zin
 Susumu Matsushita / Character designer



INTERVIEW

MARK RODGERS

Producer, *Maximo vs. Army of Zin*

play: First of all, what's it like for an American producer in a U.S. studio of a Japanese company working with Susumu Matsushita?

Mark Rodgers: I enjoyed working with Susumu Matsushita a great deal. He is a very interesting individual and absolutely brilliant at what he does. We worked closely together at the beginning of the project to define Maximo and the unique creepy look for the Zin Army. Although distance was an issue (he was first based in London and then in Tokyo!), the quality of work and content he brought to the game more than made up for it.

What was your involvement on the first Maximo?

I was also the producer for Maximo 1. I think the role of a producer varies a lot from company to company (and country to country). For me at that time, the position was the combined tasks of a director and producer in the film industry; both positions are responsible for the quality of the product and its delivery. Ultimately, it's the team that is responsible for creating the game. A game is a thousand decisions stacked upon the other. I was lucky to work with a great set of people for both games.

After the first game, you likely got an earful about having to pay to save and warp, but how was the reaction otherwise?

You had to bring up the save system! OK, for the record and in our defense, we were trying to pay homage to the classic continue systems of yesteryear and at the same time balance it with a modern save system! It was not our finest decision and was on the top of the list to be corrected for the sequel. However, I was extremely pleased with the reaction to the first game; the response to Maximo by the press was amazing in both the amount of coverage and the great reviews we received. Public feedback was also very positive.

Of course this is Capcom Studio 8's second hit, but if we didn't know otherwise, it looks like a game crafted in Japan. How has the game been received there and how involved has Japan become in the project now that it has taken off?

The Army of Zin has been received very well in Japan, receiving a gold medal from *Famitsu* magazine (which is no small achievement). Japan's involvement has not really changed due to Maximo's popularity. Capcom R&D's structure is designed to promote the creation of innovative and high quality titles.

So, the undead no longer rise from their graves, there's no sign of Ghouls 'n Ghosts music, etc. Would you say the game has now shed any reference to G&G and become more its own brand?

For the sequel, we wanted an enemy that was uniquely identifiable as part of the Maximo franchise. We also wanted to focus on the action and combat. What is better than an army of clockwork soldiers driven by the souls of the undead? We could not resist at least one undead reference!

Did Tommy T. do the music once again? It sounds markedly better. Is that because it's more an original score now?

Yes, Tommy did the music. I think his work on Maximo 1 was also great and fit the style and pace of the original perfectly. The sequel, however, is quite different and required a unique approach, which he was able to achieve. For those who don't know Tommy, he's a great guy, and the world is a more interesting place for having him in it!

The game benefits greatly from the real-time

integrated story bits, which also opens up the universe considerably. Did you go real-time over CG to make it a more seamless experience?

Yes. If given an option, we still would have used real-time over CG. Maximo 1 did not have real-time story cinematics and we were fortunate to hire an excellent artist experienced in this area for the sequel.

The CG intro is stunning. Was this done at Capcom Studio 8?

The CG was created by Digital Frontier in Japan. We like to keep the internal Studio 8 team focused on the creation of the actual game. Creating CG of this size and quality is an extremely large undertaking.

Is Maximo now considered a Capcom brand in the vein of Resident Evil, Mega Man, etc. to the extent that the sequel will begin immediately rather than wait to see what Zin does?

Time will tell.

Making the game more palatable to a wider audience, you've done a great job. Having played the bulk of it, the key seems to be playing each level to its fullest (collecting coins to save villagers and vendors) in order to equip Maximo for the battles ahead. How did this new concept come about?

Thank you. Saving the innocents came from the realization that in most "heroic" games, the main character spent most of his or her time just looking after themselves which is not really synonymous to heroism. If the player wishes to save the innocent, he or she has to play better, put themselves in harm's way to reach them in time, or just let them die. But a dead innocent cannot whisper secrets or reward the player.

Great bosses too, really fantastic. Did Matsushita create them all? Do you give him ideas or guidelines or are they pre-determined?

Thanks again. The functionality for all the enemies is determined within Studio 8. These ideas were then sent off with some visual guidelines to Mr. Matsushita. What we got back was always surprising and rarely required revision.

Tell us a little bit about your process. In creating a game as tight, event driven and immense as Zin, do you storyboard everything first, design the entire game and then go in and tweak each level, or do you design and perfect each level and then move to the next?

The broad themes of the game were led by our designers in consultation with the whole team. Once these themes were set, the team split up into groups each attacking specific tasks/areas of the game. Storyboards were created when the size or nature of the task required it or when interfacing with outside contractors (like with the FMV).

What sort of barometer do you use when balancing difficulty? You seem to use some dynamic difficulty as well...

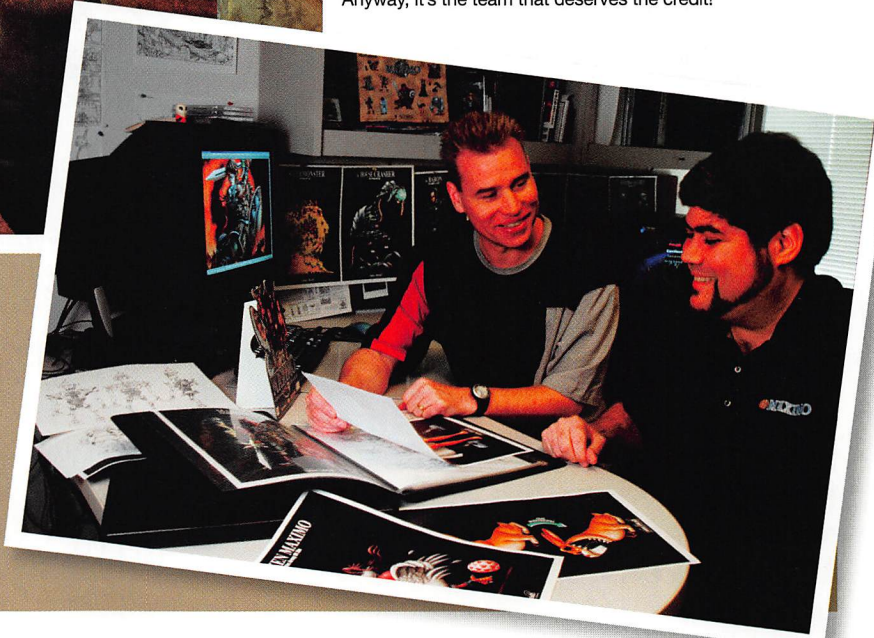
I feel that people buy games to have a good time and not to get frustrated while playing them. Through focus testing, we found frustration points and depending on where those points were in the game we decided to either tweak them or let them go. Also, we implemented a dynamic help system in the game. So if a player was having a difficult time with a specific area, dynamic mechanisms are in place to increase the likelihood of the player receiving a needed reward. This is not to say that Maximo 2 is without challenge; anyone who plays will attest to that.

"IF THE PLAYER WISHES TO SAVE THE INNOCENT, HE OR SHE HAS TO PLAY BETTER, PUT THEMSELVES IN HARM'S WAY TO REACH THEM IN TIME, OR JUST LET THEM DIE."



"THE TECHNICAL DEMANDS OF THE SEQUEL ON THE ENGINE WERE ABOUT TWICE AS GREAT AS IN THE ORIGINAL."

Tough choices at Maximo HQ:
Mark and company ogling
Tinker's naughty bits.



What would you say was your single biggest challenge creating this sequel from both the technical and design standpoints?

The technical demands of the sequel on the engine were about twice as great as in the original. On top of this, we moved our art creation over to Maya, which meant that we had to totally redesign and recode our tool chain (our method of getting data into the game). In the end, I think every technical aspect of the game was modified and improved. From a design standpoint, we began designing the sequel only after the first was released. The main challenges were time and determining the scale of the sequel.

Personally, I find the integrity of the mechanical models astounding given how many you get on screen, along with all of the effects, without ever dropping below 60 fps. This is an amazing engine. Is it being used elsewhere or is it Maximo's alone?

The engine is developed internally and unique to Maximo.

You also do some crazy mood stuff in your backgrounds. Standing on a precipice, the world seems elliptical and deeply layered with animated elements. How do you achieve this effect, and why don't we see it in more PS2 games?

We have great artists, and visuals of this type take a long time to create. As we create our own engine we also may have options not available to other developers.

Why only PS2? Shouldn't you bump map this bad boy and head for the Xbox? The GC demographic also seems like good Maximo territory.

We have had great success with the PS2 and focusing on a single platform has many advantages.

We're just a couple of years away now from the next wave of consoles. Where do you see games like Maximo benefiting from future technology...any ideas rattling around about the next big trend in action-adventure gaming?

I think innovation in gaming is now fairly independent of hardware. Look at GTA3; it was created on a third-party engine but it's still a great, innovative title. Hopefully we will see the end to 30-fps action games.

Congratulations on a stunning sequel. You're the Maximo guy in the neighborhood now, Mr. Rogers. Will you carry the torch from here on? No more changes please! If you can do one of these a year, you're certainly my hero!

It took about 1.5 years, but I hope I am still someone's hero. Anyway, it's the team that deserves the credit!

INTERVIEW

SUSUMU MATSUSHITA

Character Designer, Maximo vs. Army of Zin

Past Credits

Maximo: Ghosts to Glory
Motor Toon Grand Prix
Monkey Magic

play: Before Maximo, most fans knew you for your amazing Famitsu covers, Motor Toon Grand Prix and Monkey Magic. How were you introduced to Capcom and Maximo?

Susumu Matsushita: Capcom contacted me during the preliminary stages of the original Maximo. That's how our official business relationship started.

Tell us about the new Maximo concept. The first seemed designed around the Ghouls 'n Ghosts franchise, but Zin seems to encompass more of your vision.

I did not have Ghouls 'n Ghosts in mind when I created Maximo. However, since I've been told that my work was the inspiration for Ghouls 'n Ghosts, it is understandable why Maximo might appear to be following that image. I created the Maximo character based on the story I was given. I put a lot of effort into creating the Zin characters. It was a lot of trial and error, but I am happy with the end result. I had a lot of fun working on them.

You've also created more of a universe this time out. Might we see a Maximo anime or original video animation (OVA) soon?

It would be great to see Maximo in other mediums outside of video games. I welcome that idea with open arms.

Besides the initial design, do you also oversee or approve the in-game models?

Yes, I have supervised the development studio's work. The in-game models had to be approved whenever new ones were created.

If given the opportunity to create a film or series, would you rather it be traditionally animated or CG?

That is an interesting question. As long as I can express my vision in the best possible way, it doesn't matter to me whether it's animated or CG. If the combination of two looks best, that's what I'd choose. I would use whatever is most suitable to convey my vision.

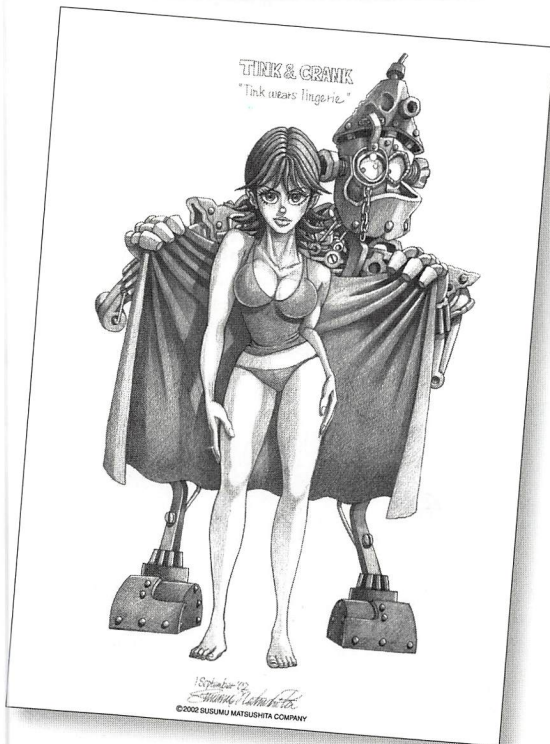
Do you keep up with character design in the U.S.? What does Susumu Matsushita think is cool? Any designers or characters you find particularly interesting?

I do pay close attention to the U.S. market, but frankly it is a bit difficult to keep up with the latest trend since there are so many new things coming out all the time. What's cool is something that looks stylish or something that is well-designed.

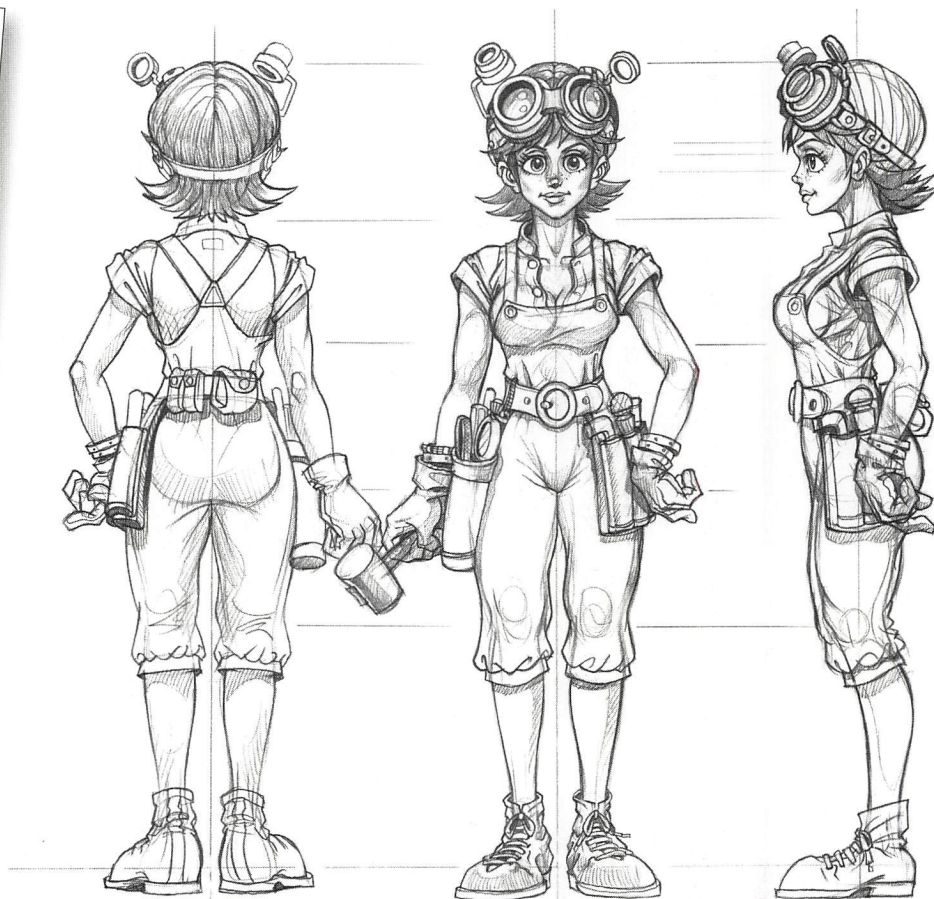
I'm always checking out other artists and the characters they create. Lately I'm impressed with "Gachakon" (vending machines with encapsulated small toys). I'm always inspired by my surroundings. So it is hard to pinpoint a particular artist or character I'm interested in right now.

And finally, how do you manage to create so many magazine covers and still work on so many other projects? Each cover seems like it would take many days to complete. Do you have a staff or do you draw and ink everything yourself?

I have three very talented assistants. We all work hard every day to manage our busy schedule.



"AS LONG AS I CAN EXPRESS MY VISION IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY, IT DOESN'T MATTER TO ME WHETHER IT'S ANIMATED OR CG."



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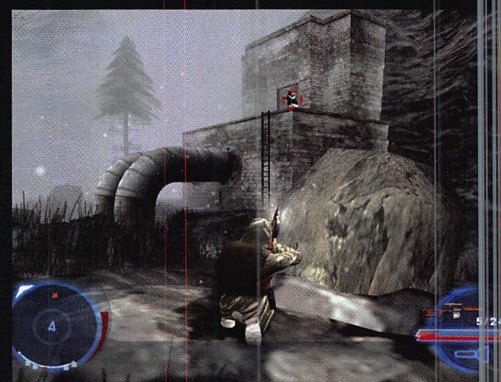


PlayStation 2

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Syphon Filter The Omega Strain

A welcome special-ops blast from the PS past



Environmental effects look good, adding to the strong atmosphere.



"...enemies are all over the place, heavily armed and never afraid to unload with aggressive force."

Before the special-ops, team-play, stealth-infused, military-themed, online (did I leave anything out?) action game became the Next Big Thing, an excellent, quietly successful campaign called Syphon Filter stood at the front of a lonely stage. Respectable success on the fledgling PlayStation opened the door for two sequels, and now, after a surprisingly long wait, the fourth installment is almost here.

Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain immediately recalls the feel and tone of the antiquated PlayStation games. Emphasis is being placed on the kill factor: enemies are all over the place, heavily armed and never afraid to unload with aggressive force. While there is talk of the ability to holster over 100 unique weapons, you can only utilize four at a time and, depending on the skill set of your fully customizable human instrument of death, won't necessarily be proficient with everything you pick up.

Here is a part of where the aggressive online approach begins to take shape. With three other members joining your efforts to halt the spread of a deadly virus, you must concern yourself with dispersing the most appropriate arms for the situation at hand, provide cover fire and much-needed assistance in tempering the intense

firefights. There's no need to find ways to solve involved pace-stalling puzzles, just the safest, most efficient path through the finely structured missions. To weave a little story into the chaos, your PDA device pumps information from home base, keeping up the momentum of the slick cutscene setups and providing multipoint objectives within the area you've been ordered to search for clues.

It's not wise to lose track of your buddies for very long, because there are a number of occasions where you'll need help crawling over difficult obstacles or climbing up through high openings. As a single-player affair, Syphon Filter: The Omega Strains offers 17 robust missions, but new sections can be discovered when you're working through as a team. The multiplayer component driving The Omega Strain is certainly going for something a little different from the norm; at the very least, it's a great addition to the massive solo adventure. **Brady Fletcher**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sony Bend
Publisher: SCEA
Available: January

Back... in black.



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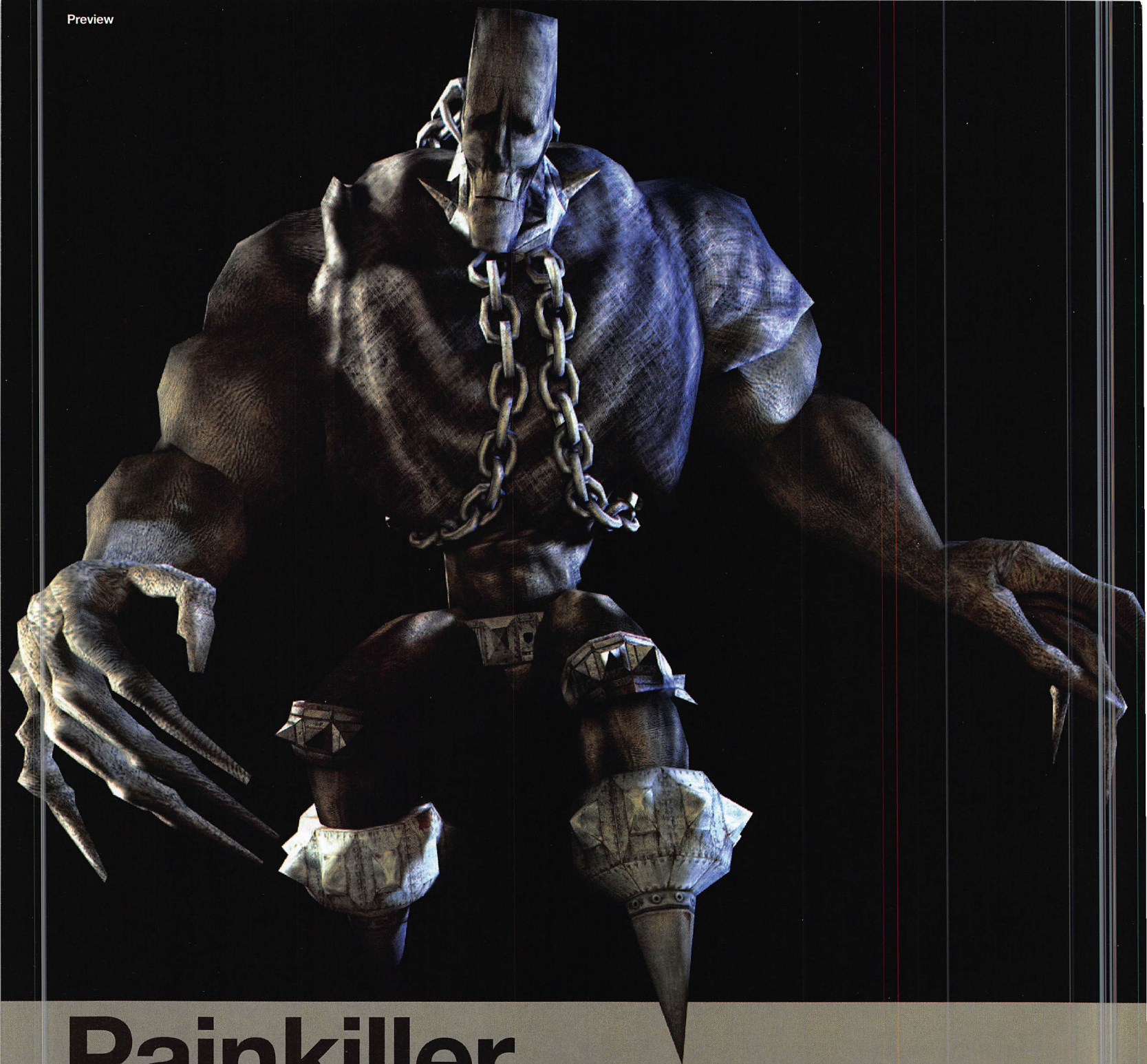
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Painkiller

Hurts so good

In Painkiller's case, the usual rule—if it looks too good to be true then it probably is—does not apply. It looks too good, yes, but it's true. This mill isn't called the "Pain Engine" for nothing. Developer People Can Fly's impressive engine puts out "100 times more polygons than other games," employing the latest lighting and shadowing techniques and does it all through 20 diverse levels of Havok 2.0 physics-based gameplay. A mouthful? Indeed, but not without merit. Painkiller is currently the only FPS in league with the integrity of Doom III, and seeing it in action is to wet your pants. Furthermore, unlike Doom III, Painkiller is scheduled to hit console in March with more

bells and whistles than its PC counterpart. The Xbox version is expected to support Live and Dolby Digital, max the system's capacity, utilize the hard drive and feature additional levels and bosses. Think Dreamcatcher is about to get a nice, fat spot on the map? You guessed right. On the PC side of the spectrum, Painkiller is so meaty that NVIDIA has formed a partnership with Dreamcatcher for the launch as part of their "The Way It's Meant To Be Played" program that showcases games that take full advantage of their hardware. This is a serious contender for 2004's top FPS honors.

The game, a swarming, haunting, fast-paced actioner,



Something tells me a Teen rating is out of the question...

"...going up against 50-foot behemoths that crunch destructible terrain around you, makes me misty."



features the most immense Gothic structures ever seen, along with level bosses large enough to guard them so vile they literally shake the very foundations of the structures. For one such area, Chaos Cathedral, the team used Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral for reference as well as churches in Poland for details like stained glass. Elsewhere, City on the Water mimics the look of Venice, while Mountain Bridge is so immense (the surroundings change every ten minutes), it's the size of three standard-sized levels.

Graphics and scale aside, PCF and Dreamcatcher set out to build a game with a compelling enough story to encourage playing to its conclusion for reasons beyond pure eye candy—a novel idea among the annals of FPS gaming outside of Halo, XIII and few others. "The physics were really the start of everything," says Dreamcatcher product manager Brian Gladman. "Once the PCF guys realized some of the things they could do with Havok, they really went to town. They've actually taken physics integration miles beyond rag doll death animations and pushing crates down stairs. In Painkiller, you can truly interact with the world, physically. We believe Painkiller is a

harbinger of a new approach to physics-based gameplay that will change the way games are designed." As deep as the story, physics and design are, look for weapons systems, multiplayer and AI to ring in just as impressive. They certainly have our attention. I can't remember seeing creature design of this magnitude in a game, and the promise of reinventing boss battles, going up against 50-foot behemoths that crunch destructible terrain around you, makes me misty. "Sure, the graphics are great, the story and the monsters are cool, and the physics are realistic," says Gladman, "but all that means nothing if the game isn't fun. In Painkiller, the fun is in the details...it's about putting fun back in the genre." I'm having a good time just looking at it. **Dave Halverson**

System: PC, Xbox
Developer: People Can Fly
Publisher: Dreamcatcher
Available: March





Final Fantasy XII

A new direction, a world of new possibilities

War rages in the land of Ivalice. As the Archadian Empire and Rozarrian Empire wage their bloody battles, the Kingdom of Dalmasca is caught in the middle. With their king having recently passed away, Dalmasca falls before the Archadian Empire's might; occupying forces fill the magnificent city streets and the citizens are powerless to stop them. Conflict transforms Dalmasca's mighty structures and beautiful blue skies into a battlefield, filled with malevolent airships and armor-clad knights atop their chocobo steeds.

Elsewhere, revolution has already occurred. Though bloodless and peaceful, without the clash of steel and cries of the wounded, this shift in power is perhaps even more dramatic. This metamorphosis has taken place within the very walls of Square Enix itself, putting the future of Final Fantasy into capable new hands, and the result promises to be a game the likes of which we've never seen. The likes of Final Fantasy XII.

At a press event held in the Roppongi district of Tokyo this past November, Square Enix began revealing the details of its latest venture into the world's premier role-playing series. Square Enix personnel, press both foreign and domestic, retail partners and even 100 lucky Japanese fans filled the deluxe theater where Final Fantasy XII scaffolds adorned the stage, illuminated in blue light. Of course, also on hand for the unveiling were Square Enix's Product Development Division 4, the new team behind FFXII, and FF series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi.

"The series itself has really nurtured and put an emphasis on change," said Sakaguchi as he addressed the audience. "When you think about the definition of Final Fantasy, the definition itself exemplifies change."

As the few minutes of game footage debuted, it was not immediately apparent what changes were in store for Final Fantasy fans. The trailer—which consisted of images of the new hero, Vaan, and the new female lead, Ashe, as well as long-snouted monsters, a beautiful cityscape brought to life by magnificently detailed architecture and hundreds of airships, an ominous knight known as the Judge, and massive CG battles that can only evoke comparisons to *Lord of the Rings*, among other elements—looked absolutely breathtaking, as if gamers would expect anything less from Square Enix. But beneath the unquestionably gorgeous veneer lies the enigmatic gameplay, which the creators continuously hinted would be substantially different from what has come before.

Chief among the factors contributing to Final Fantasy's promised new direction is the Product Development Division 4 creative staff. Producer/director Yasumi Matsuno (also head



Pictured above, the FFXII VIPs (L-R):

Akihiko Yoshida (character design & 3D map direction), Hiroshi Minagawa (graphic & character modeling), Isamu Kamikokuryou (background art), Hideo Minaba (art director), Hironobu Sakaguchi (creator of Final Fantasy), Yasumi Matsuno (producer & director), Kensuke Tanaka (business & marketing producer, Product Development Division 4).



So far the battles look like traditional Final Fantasy encounters, but that may very well change.

"When you think about the definition of Final Fantasy, the definition itself exemplifies change."

**VAAN**

Seventeen-year-old Vaan is played in FFXII by Japanese up-and-comer Tohei Takeda. Takeda not only performed Vaan's voicework and motion capture, but was also used as the basis for the character's likeness. "Until he was cast, the main character was actually even more feminine," said Hideo Minaba.



ASHE

Ashe has been described as looking very much like a Tetsuya Nomura (FFVII, etc.) character.

However, says character designer Akihiko Yoshida, "I didn't have anything in mind about Nomura's style or art. Maybe it's because of the colors that I ended up using on the characters."

of the division), art director Hideo Minaba, character designer Akihiko Yoshida and composer Hitoshi Sakimoto are well known for their contributions to games like Final Fantasy Tactics, Tactics Ogre and Vagrant Story. Fans of Matsuno's past works no doubt recall that FFXII's world of Ivalice was the world where games like Final Fantasy Tactics Advance took place, although this is not the same world that's been seen before.

"It's very hard to say how different it's going to be," said art director Minaba. "But I would say that it is another version maybe of what you've seen previously. We might show a different version of Ivalice. We get to portray the world and show the world and present the world in a different way...the world that we all love."

With these clear tie-ins to some of the most respected strategy-RPGs ever released, as well as the massive army vs. army CG battles shown in the FFXII trailer, one of the first questions that came to mind was what, if any, strategy elements will be incorporated into FFXII? At this point, the creative team isn't willing to say anything specific. In terms of in-game combat, the footage shown only revealed traditional-looking battles featuring a three-character party, but the creators strongly hinted that they have something else in store.

"All I can say at this point is that once you play it, it's going to be a fresh, new feeling that also at the same time is shocking in a good way," Minaba said. "I think you saw that the controls and the gameplay seemed quite different. ...I'll kind of right now leave it up to your assumption as to how that's going to tie in with the meaning of change in this game."

At this time, however, several specific aspects of

"All I can say at this point is that once you play it, it's going to be a fresh, new feeling..."

Final Fantasy XII have been revealed, including the main characters. Vaan, the new hero, is a 17-year-old male who lost his family in the war that serves as the backdrop for the game, and he wants nothing more than to become an airforce pilot so he can escape the confines of Dalmasca. As has been typical of Final Fantasy games of late, Vaan is a somewhat androgynous character; he also bears a bit of resemblance to Vagrant Story's Ashley Riot.

"In the early stages of development, the male character actually was more rugged and more big and tough," said character designer Yoshida. "But as we started shaping up the scenario...it became what you see now. But if you saw the first character that I had drawn, I don't think people would have been able to come along with me. I was trying to make great characters for...a snowy environment, and it was basically this big monster, and the weapon happened to be a snowboard. That wouldn't really fit into what we have now."

Sharing the spotlight is 19-year-old Ashe. Though Ashe is princess of the Kingdom of Dalmasca and sole heir to the throne after her father passes away, she finds herself founding a resistance movement after her land is conquered. While Square Enix declined to comment on the supporting cast, a dark-skinned, white-haired, humanoid female named Fran, who wields a bow and appeared to have bunny ears, could be clearly seen in the trailer, and a male character with a regal air and a frilly, decorative shirt also appeared to be one of the game's heroes.

On the other side of the equation (and also prominently featured in the game's logo) is a dark knight called the Judge. Final Fantasy Tactics Advance players will recognize the Judge as a protector of law and order, but the character in FFXII is an adversary that exemplifies terror and fear. At this

time, it's unknown which empire they serve (or if one of the empires serves them), but Square Enix have confirmed that there is more than one Judge. Did somebody say Judge Cid?

As demonstrated by Fran, not all of the characters in FFXII are human, and this corresponds to a social hierarchy in the world of FFXII. "The human races will definitely be more the primary race, but the non-human races will play a good amount of roles," explained Minaba. "I think we can't really...present anything about history without talking about races and the social classes, so that's something that should exist if we are going to continue with the stories that we have now." Aside from racial groups like humans and rabbit-people, a race of lizard-people will play a part, as will moogles (who will likely be stomping around in metal boots). The different races will even have different languages, religions and social values.

The creation of the game's world and architecture has been given no less attention than that of its peoples. Background designer Isamu Kamikokuryou, who also

created the backgrounds in FFX, drew upon inspiration from Mediterranean, Turkish and Indian designs—and even from the art deco regions of New York—to produce the amazing earthy, detail-filled environments seen thus far in FFXII.

"As you'll see hopefully sooner [rather] than later, in various parts within the game...we're trying to maximize a variation from each location," said Kamikokuryou. "We're going to try to maximize the look...in each of the regions and try to create a lot of variety and flavor for the settings that we have in the game. In FFX, for example, I felt that there was just kind of one big, very strong world...but in FFXII you'll see more of a variety of different influences."

Another change to the game lies within the camera system. Although players of Final Fantasy XI will feel right at home, FFXII will be the first offline FF title with complete freedom of camera movement. Players will be able to rotate the camera 360 degrees, and possibly even go into a first-person mode. The downside to this added freedom is that it makes the polygon count tighter—since objects that were



previously unseen, like ceilings, now have to be rendered—so characters will actually use significantly fewer polys than in FFX. To make up for it, however, Square Enix have added notable refinement to the textures, actually adding enough integrity to the visuals so that more of the cutscenes will be presented in high-quality real time as opposed to CG.

In terms of sound, FFXII will once again boast full voiceovers in addition to the musical abilities of some of the most respected composers in the video game world. While Hitoshi Sakimoto is composing the bulk of the game's tunes, FF mainstay Nobuo Uematsu will be contributing at least one major song to the game. As has been the custom since FFXIII, the powerful song will be implemented during a pivotal scene in the game, and also will likely serve as the game's ending theme. "Please let us spend a little more time on this," Sakimoto said. "We promise we will not betray your expectations."

As for the rest of the changes taking place in Final Fantasy XII, fans on both sides of the Pacific will just have to wait a bit longer. FFXII isn't due for release until summer 2004 in Japan and no earlier than the holiday season of 2004 in North America—but Square Enix promise that more details will be revealed in the near future.

The company also promises that they are working as hard as they can to get the game completed and into the hands of their fans. "In [our headquarters] in Shinjuku," producer/director Matsuno pointed out, "there are staffs working without taking any dinner!" Maybe he was joking, maybe not. After all, this is Final Fantasy XII. It's not just a game; it's war.

Chris Hoffman

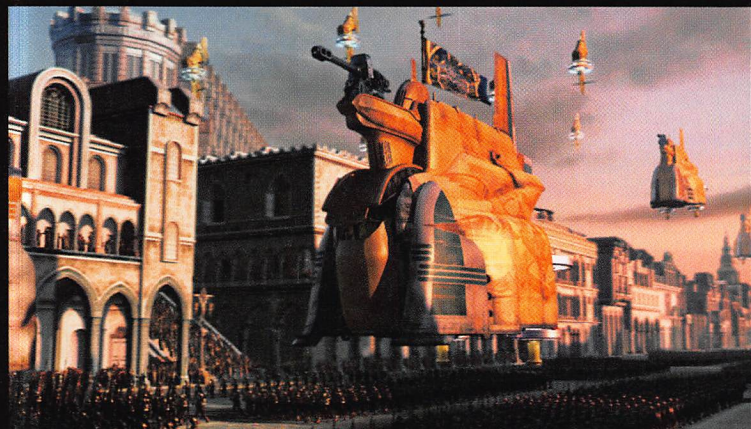
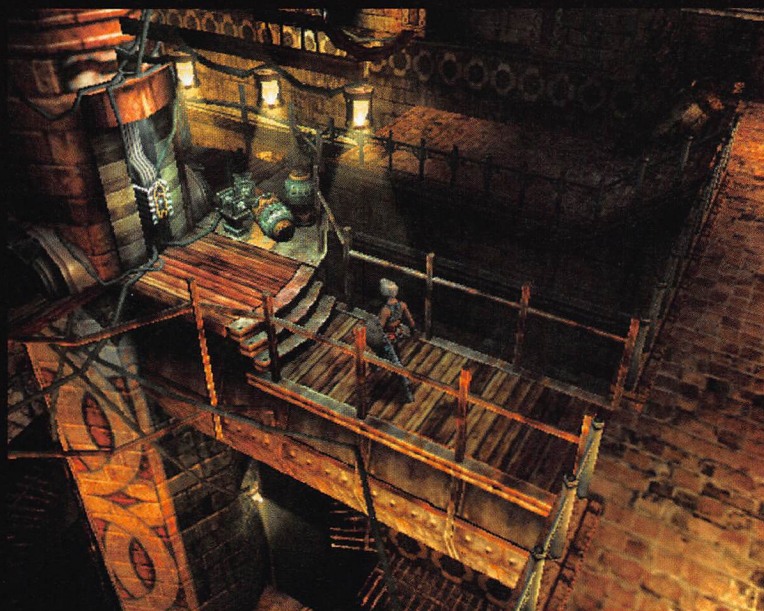
System: Playstation 2

Developer: Square Enix (Product Development Division 4)

Publisher: Square Enix

Available: Summer 2004 (Japan), TBA (U.S.)

Not surprisingly, amazing CG cutscenes, like the one seen below, highlight FFXII.



THE LOGO

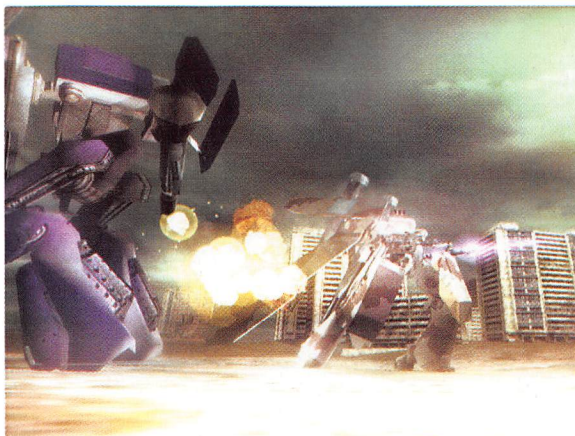
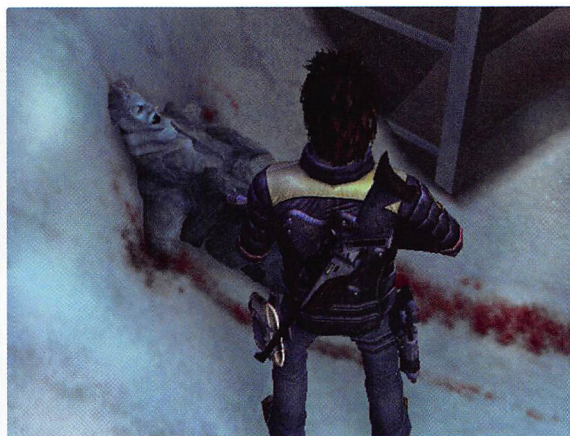
As always, Yoshitaka Amano has designed the logo for the latest Final Fantasy. This one prominently features the Judge, one of the game's main antagonists.



Ghosthunter

system: ps2 / developer: scee cambridge / publisher: sony / available: tba

Looking at the state of these screens, it's a wonder that Ghosthunter isn't being paraded around in the U.S. like a trophy wife, but so far, no one is laying claim to it. SCEA's still calling any announcement tentative. Brought to you by SCEE Cambridge Studio (MediEvil, Primal) and inspired by the cinematic styling of classic horror films, Ghosthunter combines film-quality graphics and a compelling storyline with the solid gameplay Cambridge is known for, immersing all comers in a macabre, supernatural universe packed with stealth, exploration and all-out action. -DH



Steel Battalion: Line of Contact

system: xbox / developer: capcom / publisher: capcom / available: march

So, you're one of the lucky ones. You had not only the spare funds to purchase Capcom's advanced mech simulation, Steel Battalion, but also the iron determination to survive its unforgiving, realistic combat. What's next for the elite combat pilots of the future? Xbox Live. Steel Battalion: Line of Contact puts that deluxe 40-button controller back into service, and more importantly lets you take the action online in five-on-five action, going up against other human players. Aside from the online play, the original campaign missions are included, along with new Vertical Tank types. -CH



Terminator 3: Redemption

system: ps2, gc, xbox / developer: paradigm / publisher: atari / available: summer 2004

Atari's going for round two with its Terminator license in Terminator 3: Redemption, this time a third-person action game with a large dose of vehicle combat thrown into the apocalyptic mix. The game is dipping into the movie from last summer for its inspiration, building its universe out of recognizable set pieces and characters while expanding with a variety of gameplay scenarios. The idea behind the game is to capture the explosive intensity of the chase scenes and action contained in the movie, with the political-Terminator himself, Governor Schwarzenegger, providing the voice for his polygonal likeness. -BF



The Red Star

system: ps2, xbox / developer: acclaim austin / publisher: acclaim / available: fall 2004

Acclaim's upcoming The Red Star, based on a U.S. comic created by Archangel Studios, will make its game debut this fall for the PS2 and Xbox, offering perhaps the next best thing to either PowerStone or the ill-fated Thrill Kill. Described as a "battle action game," The Red Star intends on taking players deep into the chaos of war, taking up arms in a revolution immersed in massive battles, armed with futuristic weapons and military sorcery, set amongst the ruins of Russia. Looking at the comic, the material is certainly strong. In the hands of the able Vexx team, expect the best Acclaim has to offer. -DH





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Fable

system: xbox / developer: big blue box / publisher: mgs / available: spring 2004

Peter Molyneux's (Black and White) stunning action-RPG of choices continues to excite us the more we see. The idea that every action determines your character's skills, appearance and morality (growing from an inexperienced child into the most powerful being in the world, choosing the path of righteousness or a life of evil) is one of the more ambitious to date. On the technical side of the equation, muscles expand with each feat of strength; obesity follows gluttony, skin tans with exposure to sunlight and bleaches bone-white by moonlight. You even earn scars in battle and lines of experience with age. -DH



Cold Winter

system: ps2, xbox / developer: swordfish studios / publisher: vu games / available: october 2004

You, the intuitive reader, have concluded that Cold Winter is yet another first-person shooter, in which you shoot things with really powerful weapons. Ah, but that would be oversimplifying this interesting, very early game that actually allows you to make your own weapons and pick bodies for valuables, face enemies who are entirely driven by AI—not scripted events—utilize an infinitely replenishable health supply pack, sneak around a little in the name of that newly loved stealth component. High praise that you don't simply pick up what you need from the conveniently giving ground, move on, shoot, exit level. -BF



Malice

system: xbox / developer: argonaut / publisher: tba / available: q1 2004

An Argonaut-made, fully bump-mapped, manga-style platforming epic...with no release date or announced U.S. publisher...still. Why don't they just smash me with a hammer? Argonaut will only say that Malice is due Q1 2004 but no other details are currently available. Hey, that was some timely cover we did, eh? I think the same month we finally run this review I'll whip out the reviewable Evil Twin again and we'll make it a double date. At least it's on the way...supposedly. I'll breathe that sigh of relief when it becomes official. Maybe Malice and Tork are locked in a sordid love triangle! Both games are scheduled for Q1 '04. Cross everything. -DH



Samurai Warrior

system: ps2 / developer: omega force / publisher: koel / available: march 2004

Look familiar? Samurai Warrior is the follow-up to the apocalyptic tactical action series Dynasty Warriors, building on the foundation of a massive stage of war in feudal Japan. Much of what had made the Dynasty Warriors games a success is being preserved for this latest take on the series, while adding fresh gameplay approaches to the heavy amounts of insane action. A big focus is being placed on a rich story culled from the Sengoku World, following the paths of samurai, ninjas and the warlords who fought so passionately for control of their land. -BF



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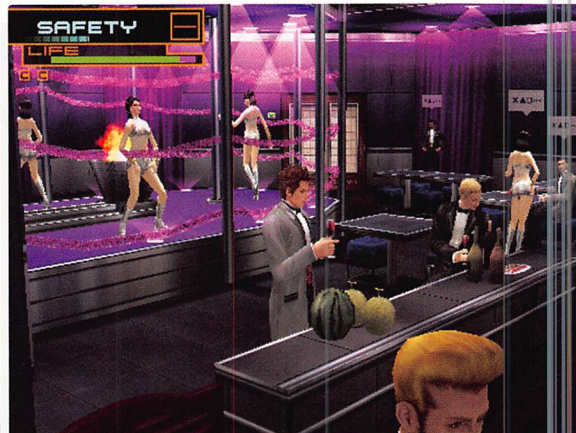

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Spy Fiction

system: ps2 / developer: access games / publisher: sammy / available: september

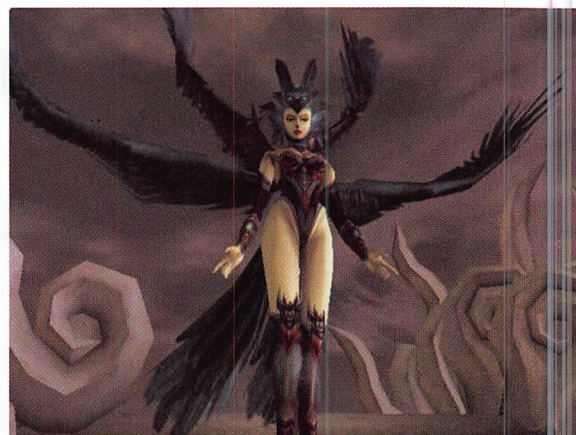
Already looking quite impressive, Spy Fiction is the latest entry into the stealth-action subgenre. Stealthy kills and awesome gadgets, like optical camouflage and a Spider Grip for clinging to ceilings, are virtually a given, but the main hook is the ability to take pictures with a 3D camera, allowing you assume your subject's identity, thus permitting access to new abilities, areas and information. Two operatives—Billy Bishop and Sheila—are playable in this globe-spanning quest, and it all looks excellent thanks to a very Metal-Gear-like aesthetic, only punctuated with fantastic character designs by anime artist Range Murata. -CH



Seven Samurai 20XX

system: ps2 / developer: dimps / publisher: sammy / available: march

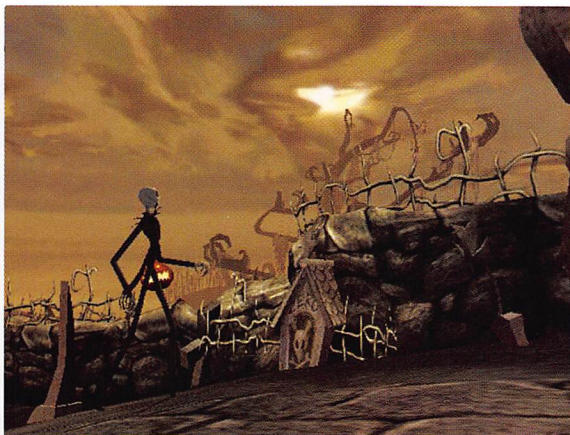
Based on the classic Kurosawa movie, Seven Samurai 20XX takes the film's story, that of recruiting six other samurai to defend a village, and adapts it to a futuristic setting—call it a remake on a grand scale. The gameplay in Seven Samurai 20XX is pure hack-and-slash madness. A variety of weapons and attacks are available and you can even power up to wield dual blades; 200-hit combos aren't out of the question. Perhaps the greatest aspect of the game is the excellent visual design work by famed French artist Mobius (*The Fifth Element*, etc). -CH



Nightmare Before Christmas

system: ps2 / developer: capcom / publisher: capcom / available: fall 2004

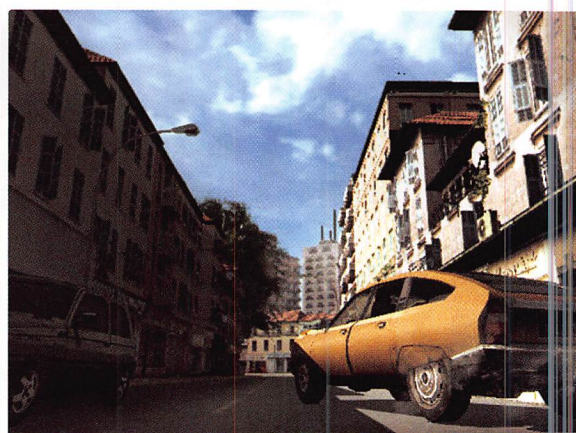
Capcom's giving us the full scoop next month on their highly enticing interactive take on Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, so in the meantime, here's what we know: not nearly enough! The game is an action-adventure romp through a world inspired by the richly humorous, wildly imaginative film's set pieces. You take control of the marvelous Jack Skellington, aka The Pumpkin King, who's out to take back Halloweentown from the dirty little paws of Oogie Boogie. Can't wait. -BF



Driv3r

system: ps2, xbox / developer: reflections / publisher: atari / available: winter 2004

Michael Madsen, Ving Rhames, Mickey Rourke and Michelle Rodriguez round out the heavy hitters of Hollywood providing the voice talent for Driv3r, the action driving game that leaves its PlayStation roots to compete in the very different world of PS2 and Xbox; its 12-million-in-sales success has a lot to live up to. The game follows the same style of play as before, containing all the crime busting and violent chaos this genre loves to provide a home for. Setting includes three distinct cities: Miami, Florida, Nice, France, and Istanbul, Turkey. -BF



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Deus Ex Invisible War

Choose your sides carefully and conquer the invisible war

Deus Ex: Invisible War is a game of admirable ambition, big on ideas yet shaky in execution. There are moments when the game brushes with high intrigue, moments when it stalls on approach to full immersion. If only more games attempted to create such a smart, bold place of fantasy.

The game takes place 20 years after the Great Collapse in Deus Ex, showing us a cold world of social and economic decay. Security bots roam the halls; cameras watch your every move. Various factions are at war, vying to take control of some semblance of a new society. As the gender-tailored Alex D., an operative-in-training at the corporate-controlled Tarsus Academy, your sophisticated biomodifications set you apart from the normal resident; when terrorist activity picks up and destroys the entire city of Chicago, you're whisked away to the oppressive claustrophobia of Seattle, again forced to go on the run as the facility you're on also gets attacked.

No one can be fully trusted. As you begin to explore Upper and Lower Seattle before escaping to various parts of the globe, there are numerous opportunities where choices must be made that define a very distinct moral path. Never has a game made me thoughtfully contemplate the gravity of my actions quite like this. Taking down a victim or avoiding conflict altogether may sometimes be a clumsy affair, but the combined impact from the tremendously detailed story, open gameplay path and strong visual presence work together to apply a tight hold.

Consider a scenario: you're offered a giant reward to assassinate an important member of a warring faction. Whose side are you willing to join, and at what costs? Does it behoove you to listen to the initially offputting rantings of a religious faction such as the Order? Can you seriously believe anything a government organization strains to communicate? The story takes a lot of twists and turns that get bogged down in a convoluted delivery, and the dialogue tenuously reaches for philosophical implications, but everything here is so progressively integrated into the gameplay function that you just go with it and start to enjoy the experience as the game gathers steam toward the middle stretches.

Where Deus Ex: Invisible War goes beyond ordinary games is in the freedom to completely tailor the way you travel through the game, based on the decisions you make in conversation and the skills and tools you currently have at your disposal—all managed according to your very specific liking. Enhance your character with lock-picking skills (gotta get this on the black market) or stick to fumbling with multi-tools while instead focusing your biomod upgrades on, say, speed and strength slots. Forget direct confrontation and get to know your sniping rifle—don't forget the silencer weapons mod—or just avoid activity by crawling through the shadows and around air ducts.



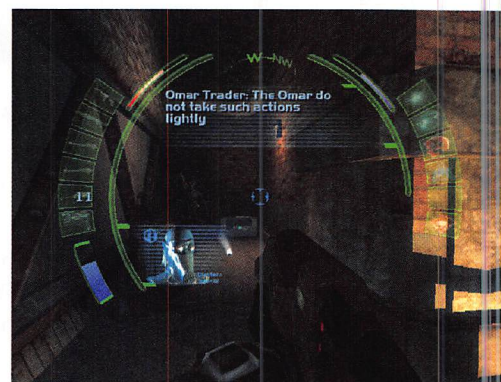
"If only more games attempted to create such a smart, bold place of fantasy."

So much freedom and emphasis on a living, active world is an awesome concept, but Invisible War's effect is weakened with blunders like dumb, lifeless inhabitants, setups that feel too convenient for the sake of artificial gameplay progression, and outcomes to serious actions that aren't nearly as impactful as they should be. Escaping to this dusky world is also a mixed treat for the eyes. Everything is lit in shadows, unsettling and sci-fi cool, enhanced by sophisticated lighting that has never been attempted at this scope on console. But the result is a serious hit in framerate, and the use of complex physics ends up looking goofy and offers no sense of proper weight on objects.

So much good, so much that could have been good, so much that could lead to an adventure unlike anything we've ever taken. Perhaps that day will come with Deus Ex 3. In the meantime, let Invisible War be your sci-fi ticket to the future world of 2072. **Brady Fiechter B**

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Ion Storm
Publisher: Eidos
Available: December

The Omar provide mods from the black market, and they just look cool.



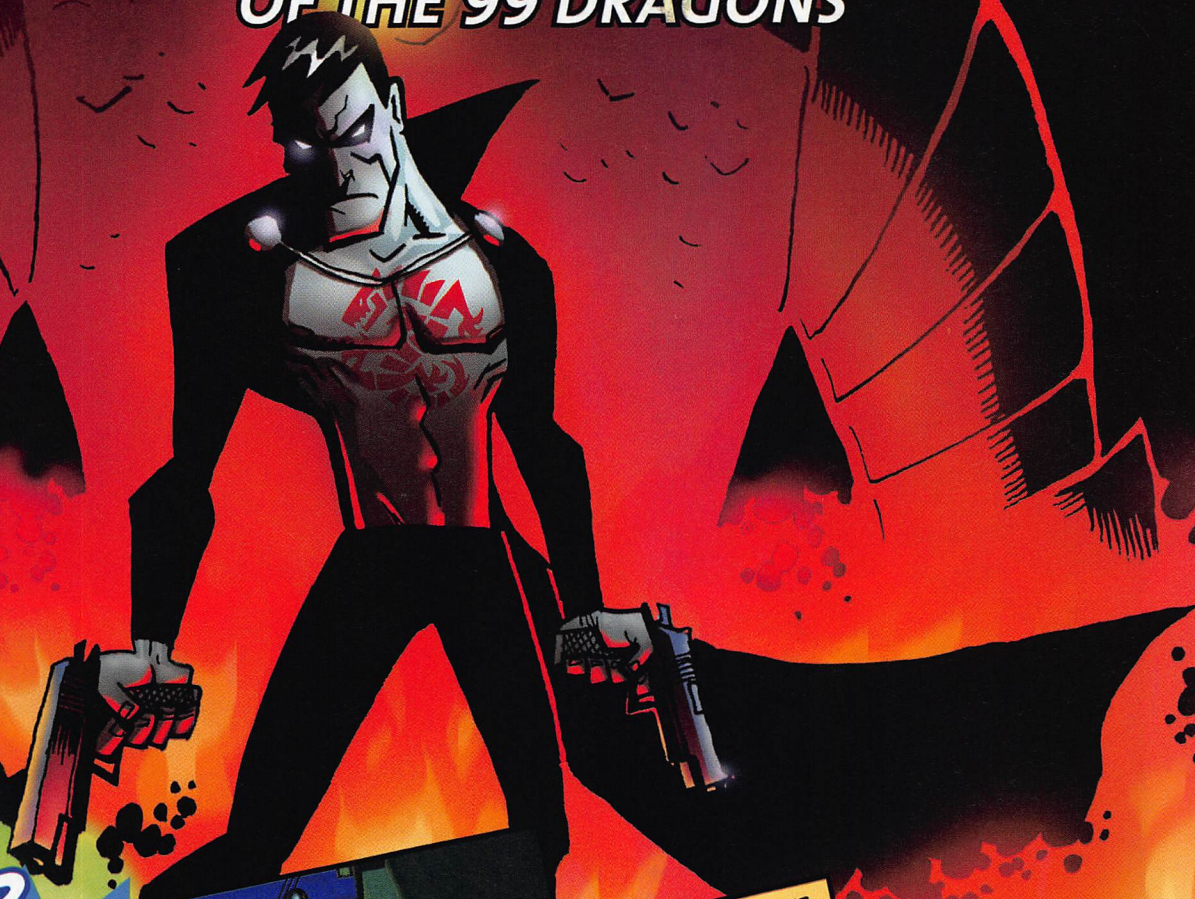


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Fatal Frame 2 Crimson Butterfly

Better than the first...and better than the rest?

It should come as no surprise if some of you find Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly more chilling than the popular Resident Evil and Silent Hill series—the obvious stalwarts of survival horror. This strong tale of spiritual possession and personal loss provides the setup to compelling images of terror and beauty, of elegance and disquiet. As an enormous fan of survival horror, I'll be the first to admit: mood can reign supreme over inspired gameplay. But what makes Crimson Butterfly that much better is a creative foundation of things to do, not just a nightmare of fear to wander around in.

Instead of managing ammunition and discovering better guns to shoot progressively more ominous creatures with, Crimson Butterfly exchanges explosive force with the exorcising flash of a simple camera and nasty monsters with the classically scary ghost. By framing these ghosts in the mystical Camera Obscura, they can gradually be worn down for permanent disposal. The way the spirits materialize from the shadows is spooky, working on jolting us with the surprise of the unseen and the mystery of what might be to come. When the shifty, slow-moving spirits converge on your presence, their look alone chills, but drawing them ever so closer to the tight focus of the camera for a more powerful shot is an entirely new way of providing tension in a video game.

It will always be argued just how much of a place cutscenes should have in games, but without these effectively stylized stretches in Crimson Butterfly, the

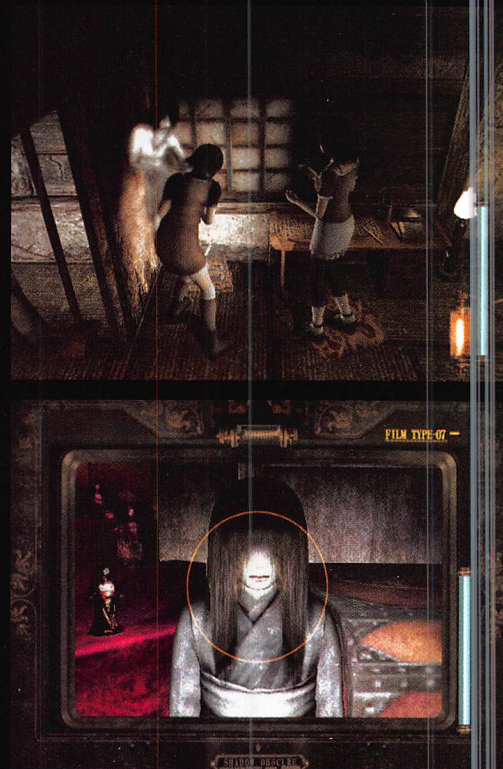
game would lose much impact. An experience like this is setup and atmosphere as much as climactic payoff, with the nourishment of a macabre imagination filling in the blanks. How impressive it is to see a game feed off restraint and subtlety for its power.

Where Fatal Frame chose to contain its setting in a spooky mansion, this more expansive sequel takes place in a village cloaked in oppressive darkness. Backtracking becomes a problem, just as it has in the best of the genre, but I was so lost to its world that I found little frustration in returning to where I'd been. If you've been playing these games for a while, you might agree with me that puzzles and collecting are becoming increasingly random and lazy—or at least feeling that way as the genre ages.

Crimson Butterfly does not stick to the staple put-the-emblem-here, push-that-switch-under-the-statue-over-there variety. They make good sense within the adventure, even providing some pieces to the story. There's still room for more inventive ways of placing us deeper into the setting through thoughtful interaction, but here is a nice change. Held against the standards forged by those two popular series of survival horror, Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly does little wrong. **Brady Flechter B+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Available: December

“How impressive it is to see a game feed off restraint and subtlety for its power.”





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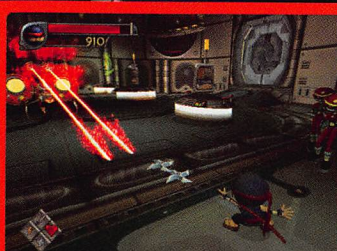
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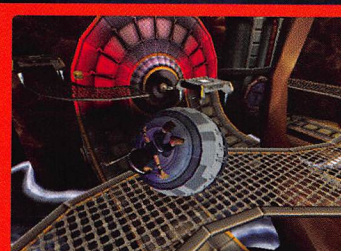
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PlayStation 2



Sonic Heroes

Sonic strikes back

What a shame that the quintessential 3D Sonic is coming at a time when mediocre games in violent guise rule the day, while the true spirit of gaming struggles to find its place in the new regime. As such, how well Sonic Heroes does will determine greatly the Sega we'll see in the future, and Sonic Team has pulled out all the stops delivering an action game that will paint a smile on your face to stack the deck. Sonic Heroes will fill you with a sense of pure fun seldom seen in the annals of modern game design.

I've never experienced as much dichotomy between a preview and review copy of a game as I have with Sonic Heroes. I already had Heroes pegged as a great game of Sonic but what I've experienced since is a revelation of the kind.

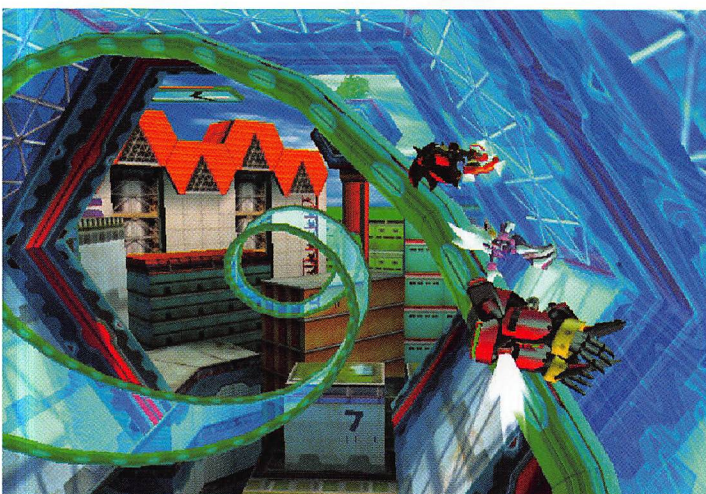
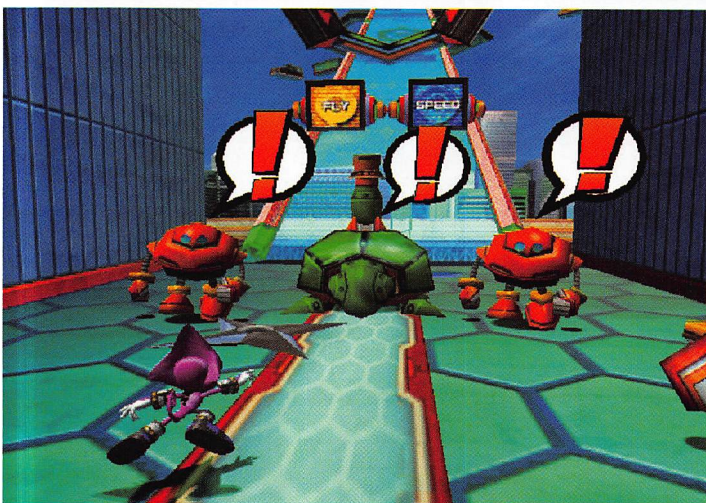
Now that the game is running in English, it's clear what that little mecha Chao was trying to tell me hovering about the team select screen (so they are good for something!): the quad team attack in Heroes offers more than mere variations on the theme, as each presents an entirely different Sonic experience. Team Sonic offers high-speed team action (and level structure tailored accordingly); Dark is fitted for intermediate to advanced players; Team Rose is ripe for beginners; and Team Chaotix (my personal favorite and the most difficult of the lot) is actually mission based. Not in the sense that you have to reach the end to complete the mission, but in that actual goals are set, taking you all over each blindingly vibrant environment, ending only



when the objective is reached—both a great way to complement the Sonic formula and accent the other team's more traditional experiences. It's also a great way to relive the magical feeling anyone lucky enough to play the 32X Knuckles Chaotix felt, glued to its chain-gang mechanics and beaming 2D graphics.

Each of the four games is everything you'd expect from a true next-gen Sonic, making the fact that four such games are offered a bonus of epic proportions. In-game team challenges further drive home an experience that embodies the best Sonic Team has brought to blue over the past decade, including (finally) a formidable Robotnik and minions that don't go down without a fight. For the first time, 3D Robotnik finally looks good—his arms welded firmly to his bulbous frame—with mecha hordes that exist beyond a patchwork of simplistic chassis and rods from the polygonal scrap yard. True boss battles, absent since Sonic CD, have returned to the Sonic agenda; simple dodge-and-kill three-hit battles have gone by the wayside in favor of much more strategic encounters (for the most part). Robotnik seems as newly dedicated as the team itself, ruling over the proceedings with the kind of menacing

Team Dark in flight formation...a little bottom-heavy.



tone that made him troublesome back in the day before becoming the bumbling afterthought of recent memory.

While Sega is obviously hoping to attract both the old-school Sonic faithful and his new (and well deserved, I might add) Fox Block fans (hence, the Rose game; she plays a major role in the TV series), the game is thankfully devoid of the adventure elements that bogged down Sonic Adventure: i.e. you won't find yourself having to look for the next level, travel in circles homing in on hidden beacons, etc., etc. The hook this time out—and the best thing to hit the series since loops, time travel and tandem play, in that order—is the teamwork integrated masterfully into each familiar zone. Each team has a speed, flight and power character to coincide with the varying challenges/layers present in each level. How effectively you use your team's abilities, switching on the fly, has a direct impact on your game and grade. It also creates the type of rhythm hardcore Sonic fans live for that was so prevalent in Chaotix and Sonic CD, games which possessed a similarly intoxicating aesthetic (which is why I play both still). Chaos Emeralds are back too...with a vengeance! Remember how hard they were to grab in Sonic 2? Well, best keep a Dramamine close; these tubes are fast, way psychedelic and no place for anyone prone to motion sickness.

Something I failed to touch on in the preview that has only just hit me (as I fall deeper and deeper in love with the purity of this game) is how astonishing it is to see an original Sonic released simultaneously on Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft hardware. The first-party icon responsible for vaulting Sega past Nintendo during the 16-bit system wars, the little blue hedgehog that became more popular in America than Mickey Mouse—less than five years ago, he was the cornerstone of the Sega empire, not to mention key in gaming's most critical growth spurt—and now here he is, ambassador of action across all three leading platforms. It's astonishing in gaming how the impossible becomes plausible. If someone asked me tomorrow if I thought we'd ever see a Mario or Zelda on PS2 or Xbox I'd have to say maybe, where five years ago I'd have probably had a good laugh.

The more I think about it, the more I realize that Sonic Heroes is really a profound release heading into gaming's future landscape. If a beautiful game like Sonic Heroes can still shine, we'll undoubtedly see more, but if not, this may just be goodbye to blue. As fate would have it, the weakest of the three Heroes happens to be the home of the mass market, the PS2 (the best being GameCube, followed by Xbox). That said, with the PS2 being home to the current glut of mainstream violence, it probably doesn't matter. Sonic's fate belongs on the GameCube and in some ways the Xbox since that is where most of the Sega faithful fled. Sega and Sonic Team have certainly done their part; the rest is up to you. **Dave Halverson A**

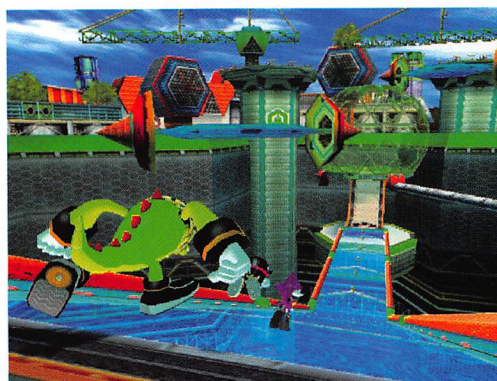
System: GameCube, Xbox, PlayStation 2

Developer: Sonic Team

Publisher: Sega

Available: January (GC), March (XB, PS2)

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Baldur's Gate Dark Alliance II

The gateway to top-down adventure is open for business

Although there is much to tell, this is a review easily summarized by simply stating that if you liked Dark Alliance, you're going to love Dark Alliance II. A bigger, better Baldur's Gate is at hand, spilling over with every last detail and nuance that makes top-down action and adventure so enduring and endearing. While the popularity of side-scrollers and shooters is waning at best, top-down continues to live on. One look at DA II's visuals and it's easy to see why. Perhaps over any other single aspect, it's the visuals on tap that most astound, although they merely serve as a gateway to a deep, rich universe. Black Isle Studios understands the importance of character models, both main and ancillary—the key element missing in the recent Dungeons & Dragons Legends. No matter which you choose—barbarian, monk, wizard, warrior priestess or hunter—all are modeled and animated to miniature perfection, looking fantastic from afar down to the scales on their armor, and on occasion just as detailed up close. I'm also a huge proponent of bought items appearing on my character and apparently so is Black Isle. I am pretty miffed that they've removed the ability to strip down the models to their naughty bits and parade them around if you so desire, but seeing as how it was a gratuitous endeavor, I'll grant them a pass. Still, when you've got female characters as fine as Vhaidra (I hear once you've had blue-skinned monk you can never go back), I see no harm in admiring their form.

As with all such games, the character you choose greatly determines the course of the game you will play. Vhaidra Uoswiir, a quick, hard-hitting monk fights best unarmed, hand to hand, while the rest vary greatly between melee and long-range attacks. All can use magic, although Ysuran Auondril, the elven wizard, excels with it. Weaponry aside, armor classes vary too, depending on build. Save it to say character development is half the fun and a key factor in replayability. Selecting from a list of variations on strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom





and charisma, the choices you make greatly determine your success in each mission, of which there are now many, many more. Commerce figures in as well, selling and purchasing weapons and, for the first time, upgrading masterwork items by attaching rune stones and gems for varying degrees of protection and magic. Every system in Dark Alliance II is deeply woven, thought through to a staggering degree, investing the player in the story to the point that doing essentially the same thing for many hours becomes engulfing rather than tedious. Some missions are better than others for sure, but the bulk of them are good to the last adventuring drop. Events stem mainly from the Elf Song Tavern, although the city itself is now larger and the springboard for many a mission and side quest: think Dark Alliance, only branching and with even greater visual bliss. The integrity of the environments and the effects are, once again, staggeringly realistic and gorgeous. From the benchmark Baldur's water to creatures that look real enough to crawl out of the screen and chew the controller cord, Black Isle have done themselves proud, adhering to the series' sky-high standards. This is a big, beautiful game that builds with each passing hour you play. Two words: Sea Temple.

We now interrupt this unbridled enthusiasm for a couple of things I'm not wild about, most notably that the game runs silent far too much. DA II has a great score, so why they don't let it flow and build at key moments (rather than run silent) is beyond me. When I'm fighting this much for this long, I need music...badly. The next is the



bosses. Plenty difficult, the problem is that any patterns or prolonged exchanges are futile. These are the types that like to send out minions to nip at your heels while you try feverishly to have a go at them, so it really boils down to leveling up more than anything else. The majority of the bosses are best fought by stocking up on potions and just hacking away with reckless abandon. That said, they're a devious lot, revealing enough back story and lore to satisfy even the most insatiable inner geek, so again, a pass.

This isn't a game about boss fights anyway, although in the future I see this as a major spot for improvement. Add a strafe and crazy boss battles and I'll give you 40 more hours of my life.

Those two points do little to deter my overall love for this game, the breadth of which is even greater than I imagined.

I can see realistically playing through with at least three of the five characters, if not all of them, just to experience the potential for devastation each class affords. Dark Alliance II is no less than the new king of the dungeon crawl, easily besting the upcoming Norrath in my opinion (although Norrath is online, so if you so desire, its allure is obvious), leaving only Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel to give it a good fight. **Dave Halverson B+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Black Isle

Publisher: VU Games

Available: January

Water sports, Baldur's Gate style.

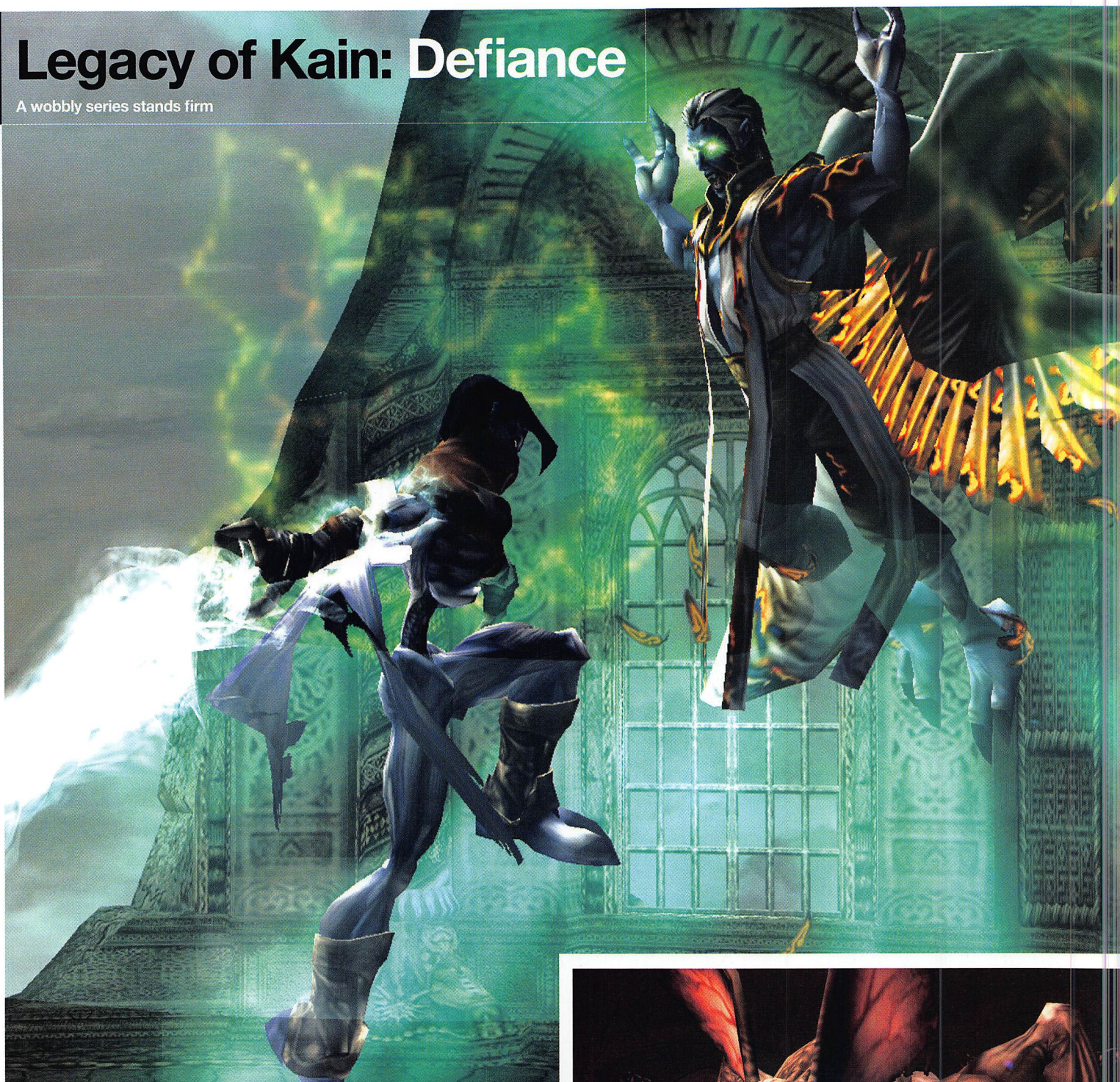
Nobody does it better.



"Perhaps over any other single aspect, it's the visuals on tap that most astound, although they merely serve as a gateway to a deep, rich universe."

Legacy of Kain: Defiance

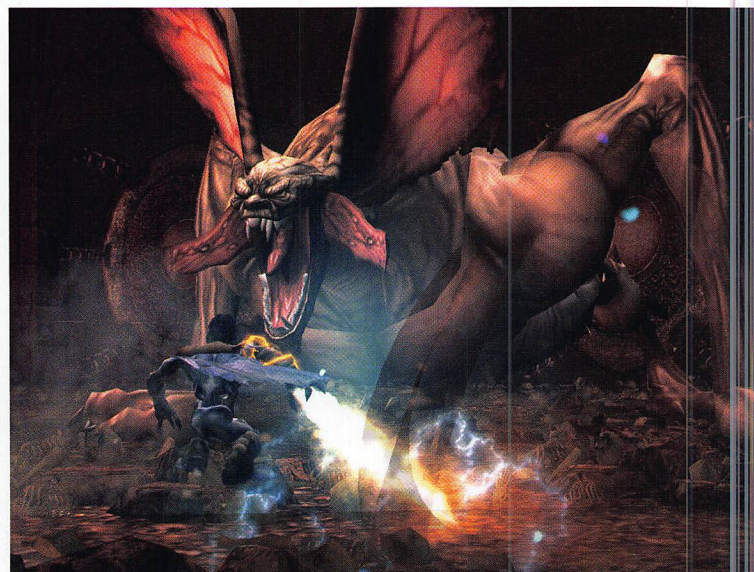
A wobbly series stands firm



For all the persistent flaws, some of which curiously continue to linger in this latest chapter, the Legacy of Kain series keeps its dedicated fans consistently coming back for more, offering one of the more distinct, richly story-driven action-adventure experiences around. As one of the faithful, I find myself so enamored of its mood and Gothic excess that I tend to forgive the annoyances and revel in the strengths.

Legacy of Kain: Defiance is much more of an action game than its predecessors, finely retooling the combat to resemble the stylized melee acrobatics of Devil May Cry. Enemies can be juggled and launched high into the air, a small array of combos learned for more effective kills, several versions of the arcane Soul Reaver powered up for brutal bursts of magic. Nearly every step in this game involves tight rooms and long paths filled with attacking hordes of the land's wicked inhabitants, to the point that you wish the interminable combat would have found some restraint by the time you reach the climactic ending.

That the close of the game actually quite satisfies in its plot is a big step in this series. The plague of death and despair has been settling ever more ominously over





It was a good change to have more boss battles worked into the formula.

Nosgoth for five games now, its ambiguous source growing more sinister by the adventure, and now both Kain and Raziel finally discover many of the answers to the dense mysteries of their home and personal enmity.

For the first time, both characters journey through the same game, played out in a sort of chapter-like scenario across separate periods of time. One unfortunate by-product of this setup is that you do a lot of backtracking and a lot of traveling through the same settings. A little more variety in the world, including the enemies you encounter, would have gone a long way in at least maintaining more visual appeal. The choice to maintain an identical control scheme and move list for both Kain and Raziel is acceptable, created quite well, but some of you will certainly wish there was a little more separation between the two appealing creatures.

Nosgoth is a captivating place to exist in, decadent and elegant, shadowy and mysterious. There exists a magnificent sense of belonging in a place that could have existed centuries ago, with architecture that fires the Gothic soul. There is a sense that the level builders studied real-world spaces and crafted the keenly designed areas around this foundation. Some areas get a little boring after you've been tooling around, confused with what you're actually supposed to be accomplishing, searching for basic items and the next version of the Reaver. But the high points—if only every area were as magnificent as Vorador's Mansion—keep you enthusiastically pressing forward. The specific camera movement, established to show off the environment and create a higher level of visual stimulus, will annoy the anal players who demand precise fields of view, but I rarely find much to complain about with cameras, and here it works just fine for my tastes.

Puzzle solving takes a back seat to the action, and there's just enough fun platforming to broaden the adventure, but you have to wonder why the designers continue to throw in those arbitrarily placed objects to push and pull. You really don't have to think in this game as much as collect and place in convenient slots. The break-up in the combat at least entertains, but it's a lazy genre residual that just doesn't want to get a thoughtful shakeup.

One of the coolest additions to the series is the TK meter, which is essentially a telekinesis store that our angry heroes can draw on when they feel like forcing enemies off ledges and into spikes and fire. I wanted this technique to come into play a lot more, but there just wasn't enough opportunity to enjoy the satisfying kills it affords. Like nearly every aspect of Legacy of Kain: Defiance, you're left entertained yet wanting for more. **Brady Fiechter B**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Publisher: Eidos
Available: November

"Nosgoth is a captivating place to exist in, decadent and elegant, shadowy and mysterious."



1080°

Avalanche

Let it snow and let it flow

I love Nintendo hooks and the way they always add that extra-special something to their games to remind you that you're playing the best. As long as they continue to put out software of this caliber, I will be of the mindset that the best Nintendo console will be the one that only plays Nintendo-exclusive games. Given the number of games the average consumer purchases annually, six or so first party Nintendo games a year, along with the best from the likes of Konami, Capcom and Square, I believe would return us to the glory days of gaming once and forever. Sign up Sega and Treasure to join the exclusive ranks and let the games begin! I love many a third-party game, but when it comes to fun, no one emphasizes raw gameplay better than Nintendo. As long as they remain vigilant as the backbone of the industry, all is well with the world.

For their next trick (having set the bar already with WaveRace way back on the 64), Nintendo have now found a way to manufacture virtual exhilaration via their latest take on the snowboarding game, the results of which have to be seen (and felt) to be believed.

I thought Avalanche was just a cool subtitle, but they weren't kidding. 1080's big draw has always been match racing with an emphasis on trimming seconds via attaining oneness with variable terrain and weather, but NSTC has taken things a step further on the Cube by engineering gaming's first true virtual avalanches. The last race in each of the four rankings isn't against a human opponent, but rather Mother Nature herself, and she's as formidable an opponent as she is a fresh breath of visual bliss. I really wish I could describe the experience, jumping out of the helicopter as serenity segues to natural phenomenon, especially on the Extreme mountain, but there's just no way to put it except to say that it's quite



“...there’s just no way to put it except to say that it’s quite possibly the ultimate rush.”



possibly the ultimate rush. If for no other reason than to experience the sensation of outrunning tons of snow and earth nipping (or perhaps ripping is a better word) at your heels, 1080 is an absolute must-own game. There are also cave-ins, collapsing buildings, rockslides, wildlife and other skiers to contend with—among snow so real you’ll try to eat it, and wind effects comparable to WaveRace’s water physics—but nothing so awesome as the precious seconds caught in the throws of an erupting mountain.

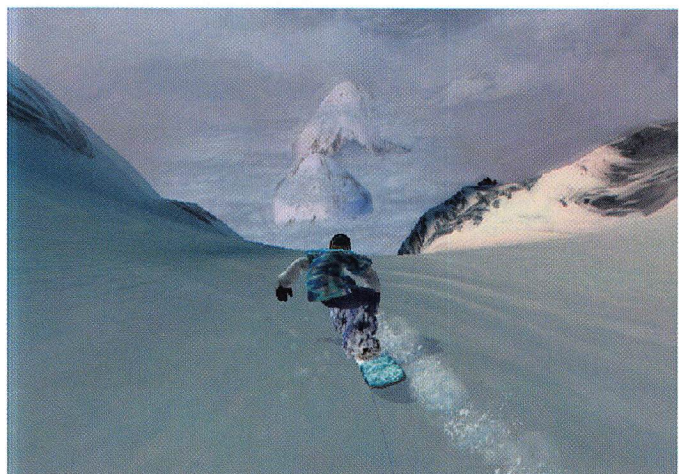
Elsewhere, Match Race overall is on the short side...until you reach the Extreme ranks and realize you’ve got to go searching for coins in the Gate Challenges to hang. Right there, what I thought would add up to a short albeit cool game became so much more. The courses may last under two minutes each at full speed, but they offer much exploration afterwards, with their mastery acting as the key to really cleaning out all of the events. Together with the depth of characters, multiplayer and LAN capabilities, unlockable features and five fully fleshed-out modes, 1080 has enough legs to hold its own in terms of substance, not to mention an iPod’s worth of licensed music (of which I must recommend Squidd’s “At The Kiosk” for your carving pleasure). It goes down extra nice too, thanks to a front end right out of WaveRace, adding that extra-special touch of first-party goodness.

Only Nintendo could create a snowboarding game amidst the likes of SSX 3, so unique it warrants warming up to two snowboarding games this winter. Between Viewtiful Joe, 1080 and Double Dash, the Nintendo faithful are well taken care of, waiting for Sonic Heroes and Crystal Chronicles to drop. Happy days indeed. **Dave Halverson A-**

System: GameCube
Developer: Nintendo Software Technology
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: December



Above: Check out how the wind is grabbing the apparel...very nice. Time to land and nab that gold coin...need it!





It's no secret that R: Racing Evolution is a bit of a departure for the Ridge Racer series. More sim-oriented than arcade, it attempts to meld the hardcore racing action of Ridge Racer with the challenge structure and car-centric philosophy of Gran Turismo. It sounds great on paper, and in execution it is indeed great, but I'll be damned if I didn't long for the Ridge Racer of old.

Don't get me wrong, however. I really like this game. Its execution is of the highest quality, with superb physics and control, and on Xbox, truly sparkling graphics (GameCube suffers from a lower resolution, the PS2 version remains untested). The ingenious Pressure Meter, which allows you to fluster your opponent into making a mistake, is a fantastic gameplay device, so simple and yet so satisfying. As you tuck in behind an opponent, you can cause their pressure gauge to rise, and once it's full, they will make a mistake at the next braking zone, allowing you to slip past. It looks awesome and it feels awesome.

As for the game surrounding the dynamics, the much talked-about Racing Life mode is but a small portion of the experience, but it's fun to play through, and the game's scads of racing challenges give you far more to do than in any previous Ridge Racer. There are also more tracks on offer here, even if some are real racing circuits.

Which rather conveniently brings me to the point where I talk about what I miss from the previous Ridge Racers.

:Racing Evolution

Don't expect a classic Ridge Racer game, and you will love it



What are these real cars doing in my Ridge Racer game?

"I would be a fool to call this game anything other than great."



As I mentioned, there are real racing circuits in this game, meaning there is less of the gleaming metropolitan futurism that I used to love so much. Indeed, this is even reflected in the interface, which is much more Moto GP-like and less stylized. I miss the cities and coastal towns that used to be so exhilarating to race through. By including tracks like Suzuka, R: Racing loses some of the originality, some of the fantasy, that existed in previous Ridge Racers. But the real issue to me is that Ridge Racer has always existed in its own sort of hardcore niche, and by taking the series closer to Gran Turismo by adding rally racing and making the game more expansive, I think it's lost something. The intimacy, the almost Zen-like relationship with the track, is not here. Even so, I would be a fool to call this game anything other than great. Feel free to disregard my personal issues unless you are like-minded.

Michael Hobbs B+

System: Xbox, Playstation 2, GameCube
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: December



INTERVIEW

Now that we've played it, we've gone back and asked a few more questions of R: Racing Evolution's director, Hideo Teramoto

play: This is a very different game from the previous Ridge Racers in terms of its structure. Were you nervous about taking this new approach?

Hideo Teramoto: "R" is not just a sequel to the previous Ridge Racer games. The purpose of producing "R" was to provide a totally new experience, encompassing various racing styles from around the world. This was our objective from the beginning of the project, so I had no hesitation.

It's a much more expansive game, isn't it? You have given the player a lot more to do, making the appeal of the game more broad. Was this your intention?

We researched many driving games from both the U.S. and European markets, with the assistance of our U.S. and UK staff. One of the directions that we decided to pursue as a result of this market research was to make a game that caters to as broad an audience as possible.

Personally, I would have been satisfied with a straight sequel to Ridge Racer V, but I was surprised by the new ideas, especially the pressure gauge. It adds a lot of life and excitement to the CPU racing. When did you first think of this idea?

I'm glad that you liked the idea. I had this idea in my head from the beginning of the project. It was a simple idea born from the answer to the question, "How do we create a racing game with battles among characters?" Since this was a very simple idea, it is very strange that we didn't come up with this idea long time ago.

Were you able to use track data from MotoGP courses like Suzuka directly, or does that game run under a different engine?

We had the basic know-how and some course data from the development of the MotoGP series, however, as the game

engine is new, we had to modify and create new course data.

How did you recreate so well the sound of the cars racing past the camera in the replays?

Our in-house sound staff and programmers recorded all of the actual vehicle sound effects. There is no special technique or shortcut that we used.

Speaking of the replays, they are fantastic. The cameras are very well placed along the circuits. This is something that lesser games always get wrong. Is there a team or a person dedicated to getting them to look so dramatic?

We have a specialized technical team that handles all of our replays. Some of these guys have years of experience, having handled the replays and camera work from our MotoGP series. I'm very happy with the quality of the replays.

Do you have proprietary software that assists you in creating the racing courses? In other words, do you have a way for someone who is not a programmer to easily lay out the courses in rough form and test them?

We have our own proprietary tools to create racing circuits. However, more importantly, the skills and knowledge of our experienced staff, who are well acquainted with cars, circuits and the data structure, was vital in creating enjoyable courses. They weren't actually programmers, but they had enough basic knowledge of programming to do their jobs.

How do you see racing games evolving over the next few years? Apart from online play, isn't it a question of just adding more and more detail to the cars and environments?

I believe there is more that we will be able to do. There are many different elements involved in the experience of actually driving cars. It is not a case of just improving the quality of visuals or sounds. Similar to the "Pressure Meter," the new feature we added to R, I believe that our job is to continue to add innovative new features.

Do you think that the increased CPU strength of the next generation of systems (PS3, etc.) will allow you to do things that you cannot do now in terms of gameplay?

Yes, I already have some ideas, but for obvious reasons I can't share them with you at this time. Sorry.

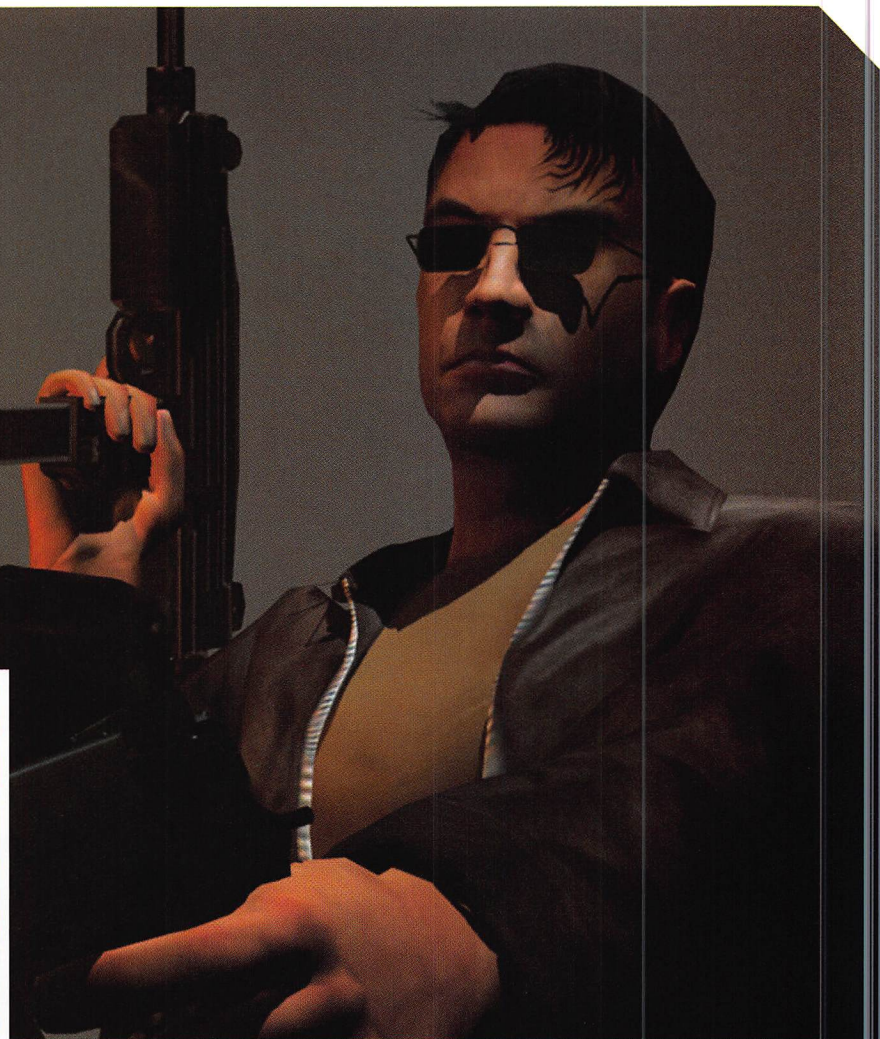
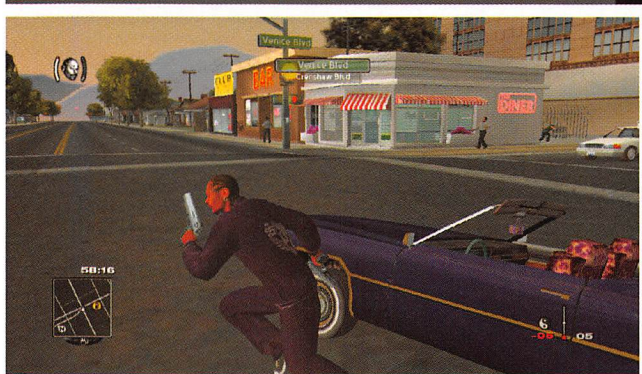
What kind of car do you drive?

I have '91 VW Golf 2 (A2 Golf). I bought it six months ago. I'm currently at the stage of fixing and exchanging old parts, but am very excited with how I can tune up my new baby!

"The purpose of producing 'R' was to provide a totally new experience, encompassing various racing styles from around the world."

True Crime Streets of L.A.

Ambitious, but ultimately a disjointed, confused effort



“Not even the irreplaceable voice acting of Christopher Walken can rescue the mess of a script...”

Not even the irreplaceable voice acting of Christopher Walken can rescue the mess of a script driving the action of True Crime, a misguided attempt to share the spotlight with the vastly superior Grand Theft Auto. Creaking along through eight short chapters that quickly conclude with three separate endings, the game puts you in the brash role of detective Nick Kang, a suspended “loose cannon” who’s alienated his fellow LAPD officers by breaking all rules and reveling in the smack talk. When he meets his new partner, Rosie, nicely voiced by Michelle Rodriguez, Nick asks her to serve him a cup of coffee, firmly establishing his asshole status.

The two soon grab a bite to eat, and by this time it’s obvious True Crime has no aspirations to tell an original story or, at the very least, invest some sort of emotion in its heavily banal trappings. Nick’s dumb one-liners—“a ninja’s got nothing on me”—go far in aiding our mental shutdown and, even worse, make us dislike his presence as a lead character in this heavily story-driven game even more.

Nick may not be a charmer, but he certainly knows how to single-handedly wipe out Russian gangs and nasty triads, who somehow manage to throw out enough heavily armed members to fill a coliseum. The shootouts are the best part of True Crime, intense and well staged. Disregard the implications of wasting countless lives within the context of a reality-driven story.

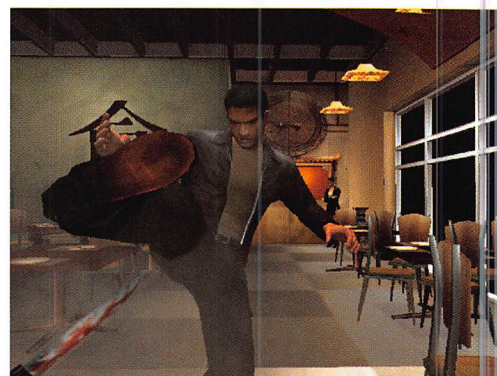
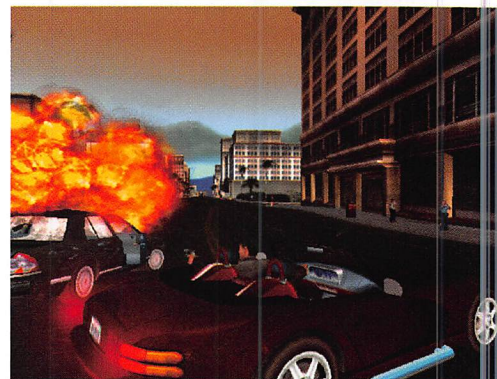
Nick is often recklessly careening through the impressively rendered streets of LA to get to his next destination, avoiding pursuing thugs and racing to beat timers. Driving around is a good time. Because of the fairly rigid structuring of the

story, missions are specifically defined but do offer a little motivation for randomly cruising. Stop offs are pretty much up to you, offering locations like dojos where you can train to upgrade your skills. Crime is omnipresent, so whenever you want to beef up your badge points or add to your good cop status (or bad cop status for those who enjoy wanton slaughtering), simply respond to the radio dispatch to run down stolen goods, break up street fights, disarm robbers.

Joining a few awkward stealth missions are hand-to-hand combat stretches, which become more involving as the complexities of the moves list increase and the difficulty begins to ramp up. For a game that exists in a very recognizable setting, intended to be familiar fiction, True Crime’s reliance on stylized, hyper animation is off-putting; it doesn’t help that the physical impact of the fighting is soft.

No one part of True Crime’s unfocused gameplay components is handled particularly well. Combined, they leave you wishing there was more attention to a tighter overall package. With the dialogue clumsily integrated and the gameplay straining to properly flow around it—this will long be a dilemma as gamemakers search to bring film sensibilities into their interactive worlds—True Crime’s attempt to provide an evolving gaming experience and contribute to the new GTA model of design is a fractured miss. **Brady Fiechter C+**

System: Playstation 2, GameCube, Xbox
Developer: Luxoflux
Publisher: Activision
Available: November



You’ll be kicking and punching a lot in this game; environments are nicely interactive.

The Legend of Zelda

Collector's Edition

Video games don't get much better than this



The Legend of Zelda: Collector's Edition is, simply put, four of the best games ever made, conveniently compiled onto a single disc. These are the games that defined genres, sold hardware, inspired imaginations, wowed millions and propelled gaming to untold heights with respect to gameplay and fun. Pay no heed to the aged visuals—this is gaming at its grandest.

Who can forget experiences like navigating through the Lost Woods or battling through the darkest regions of Death Mountain, or characters like the enigmatic Sheik or the ridiculously fruity Tingle? Actions ranging from simple, like watching the sun rise over the fields of Hyrule, to enlightening, like shooting Ganon with that fateful first silver arrow, leave indelible memories.

The success of the Zelda series has always been its finely tuned mix of action and adventure, reflex-based combat merged with clever puzzles and skillful use of a myriad of tools, punctuated by some of the most powerful moments in gaming. Each game has held to this formula, but has never been afraid to take risks; this is a series of evolution as much as tradition.

The journey begins with the groundbreaking NES original. More than 15 years after its release, The Legend of Zelda still sets the standard for adventure, providing a magical world that begs for exploration, where new gameplay elements await at every turn; few modern games can claim to hold such appeal. The underrated Zelda II follows, offering another magical experience for those accepting of its dramatic changes: side-scrolling action and a unique emphasis on experience points and spellcasting join the top-down exploration. Two hardware generations later, Ocarina of Time literally added new dimensions to the series, not only through the inclusion of time travel, but also by beautifully reinventing Zelda's revolutionary style in 3D. Such gameplay held firm in Majora's Mask, only expanded by transformations for Link and the real-time impending doom of destruction falling from the heavens.

With such specimens of gaming greatness all in one place, a perfect score would seem inevitable, but audio problems in Majora's Mask, a clunky front end on both NES titles (the interface just wasn't made for a GameCube controller) and disappointing bonus content cause small dents on the otherwise gleaming armor of this collection.

If you don't own these pieces of gaming history already, you'd be foolish not to get them now. If you already have them, playing through them again is utter gaming bliss.

Chris Hoffman

System: GameCube
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: November



What these games lack in cutting-edge visuals, they more than make up for with their gameplay.



"If you don't own these pieces of gaming history already, you'd be foolish not to get them now."

Reviews

Rating Scale

Excellent **A**
Good **B**
Fair **C**
Poor **D**
Worthless **F**



Game of the Month

» Sonic Heroes p 050

"...Sonic Heroes is really a profound release heading into gaming's future..."

Also notice...



Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly p 048

Tecmo proves once again that subtlety and tension can instill more dread than any freakish monster.



The Legend of Zelda: Collector's Edition p 062

No gamer's collection is complete without the Zelda series. The Collector's Edition compiles four of the best games ever onto one disc.



Tony Hawk's Underground

A gyrating, backwoods cop eyes a goat's backside behind a strip club...cars burn, drug dealers take chase, and Stacy Peralta chills. Welcome to the underground, as artistically challenged as it is brilliantly devised. THU succeeds where it needs to most, dragging the skating game out of its proverbial hubs and into the real world, complete with comprehensive character creation and a GTA-like framework, but its mixed visual bag demands attention. Outfit a female with short-shorts and her thighs grow permanent holes, ancillary models are low budget at best, and little is offered in the way of detail; cars look like bricks, torsos bleed through fabric, etc., etc. Luckily, the game is so fun and addictive, and the environments so brimming with goodness, you'll care not. Too bad the art is lacking.

DH **B+**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox
Developer: Neversoft
Publisher: Activision
Available: October



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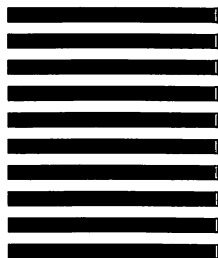
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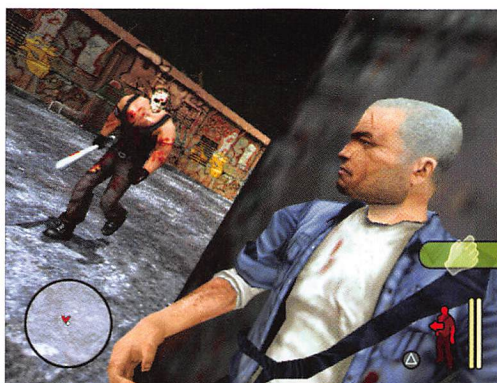




Carmen Sandiego: Secret of the Stolen Drums

I would never play Carmen Sandiego: Secret of the Stolen Drums on my personal downtime, but that doesn't mean it won't provide the younger mind a few stretches of good fun. The text-driven, globe-hopping sequences are an opportunity for innocuous education, aimed straight at the audience the game will appeal to most, but no one should forgive the game for some very limiting stealth-action-platform gameplay and enemy AI that is indeed so artificially laid down that you just lose interest in what you're asked to do before the stronger points of the game can take over. With a sparse Saturday-morning-cartoon look, the game can become a drag for the adult eye, but just like the best of those cartoons, a certain charm bubbles below the surface. **BF C+**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox
Developer: A2M
Publisher: BAM!
Available: December



Manhunt

Not that there's anything wrong with cashing in on America's bloodlust, but to call Manhunt a "mature" game, I think, is an affront to mature people. Blood, gore, violence...I'll take it all. GTA, Max Payne...but Manhunt uses its dark veneer to mask the fact that it's a mediocre stealth game at best underneath. Strip away all the nastiness and white-trash-on-white-trash killing and all of its proposed "hooks" are paper thin. Sure, you use things in your environment to kill, but it's not all as free-form as promised. That plastic bag used for smothering has its own how-to guide attached. It's merely a scripted prop like any other: three feet away, press button, watch death and move on. The game's devices evolve as the plot thickens, but why bother when you could be playing either a real stealth game or psychological thriller? **DH C**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Rockstar North
Publisher: Rockstar
Available: November



Blowout

As a value title, Blowout actually has merit. You can see where there was a full-blown Contra-style game here that went somewhat awry when they lost their hot-sh*t manga artist, but still, as a budget shot of 2D, Blowout packs plenty of heat. The game's main problem, aside from being strictly by the numbers, is the lack of a walk button. The character always runs, and too fast for the game at that. Elsewhere, however, the graphics sparkle, and the cigar chewin' lead, John "Dutch" Cane, is pretty cool, charged with essentially reporting to nodes on the map to open his way to suppressing more nasty bugs on his way to bigger boss bugs (fought shooting into the screen) and ultimately one nasty clone uprising. Just another bug hunt, but a p-cool one nevertheless. **DH B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Terminal Reality
Publisher: Majesco
Available: November

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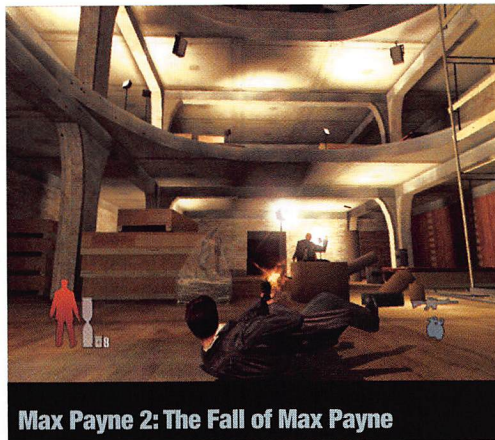
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Whiplash

Spanx the spastic weasel and Redmond the hyper bunny rabbit have been living in animal-testing prison for far too long. Attempting to escape the clutches of the Genron Corporation, the duo work as one, tethered together for some major destructive force. With the humorous social commentary, Whiplash finds originality in presentation far more than its action and platforming—both decent fun but certainly aided by the laughs. The main tethered-combat mechanic behind the game feels a bit loose and out of control at times, leaving the most enjoyment to be found in the platforming. Look past some simplistic visual designs and enjoy the bright, unique style the artists have worked into Whiplash and you'll find a solid game that entertains after you've had your fill with the holiday A-lists. **BF B**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Publisher: Eidos
Available: December



Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne

I like the old Mickey Rourke Max better (miss the shiny jacket too), but no one can stitch together a crime noir like Rockstar. Max is still waxing introspective like he's got a mouthful of Ex-Lax, but the important thing is that it's so intriguing, multiple passes beyond "detective mode" go without saying. Playing as Max's love/hate interest Mona offers a well-deserved break from Max's downward spiral and comes at the perfect time in the game (sniping to protect Max is a killer twist), and although the models are often pointed and shoddily formed, the animation and environments are so well laid it almost doesn't matter. The new Bullet Time and "Shootdodging" are suitably juiced as well. For the most part, MP2 is a gorgeous game that does its M rating proud. **DH B+**

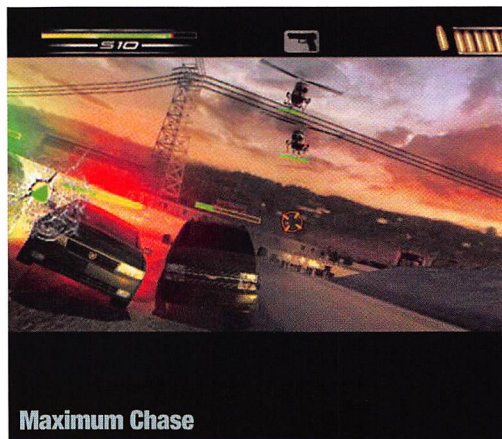
System: Xbox
Developer: Remedy
Publisher: Rockstar
Available: November



Counter-Strike

The world's most popular online multiplayer game has finally come to the Xbox and the end result is a mixed bag. On the surface, the Xbox version of CS is essentially the same game as the PC version—two teams battling it out in round-based matches where each side has a set of objectives to complete. Being an Xbox exclusive, one would think there would be something special about it—a new weapon or piece of equipment, a new map—something! The supposed Xbox-exclusive single-player mode is essentially a multiplayer game with AI bots. The only saving grace for CS on Xbox is the online multiplayer component. As it stands right now, the game definitely has a "rushed out the door" feel to it, so let's hope for substantial downloadable content. **TH B-**

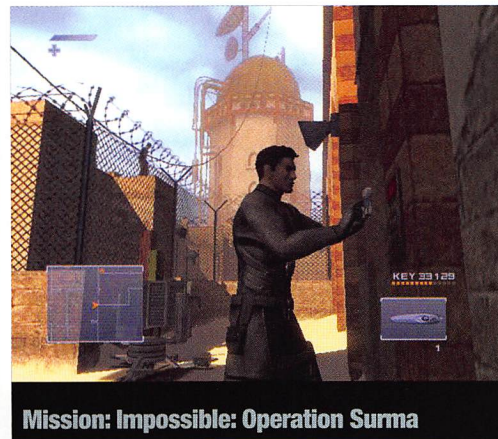
System: Xbox
Developer: Valve/Ritual Entertainment
Publisher: Microsoft
Available: November



Maximum Chase

Majesco can stick yet another feather in their cap with the surprising Maximum Chase. Part live-action film (shot using fascinating Eastern techniques), part racing and part shooting, it's all remarkably beautiful as you essentially drive your arse off running from the underworld's attack choppers, blacked-out Cadillacs, H2s and other GM rides, in between shooting segues that play out with so much ferocity it's a wonder the screen doesn't crack. The integrated movie plays out in dual layers through filmed and spoken sequences, revealing a plot to destroy LA, while the game adheres to its Goodwrench standards via perfect control. I haven't seen environments and vehicles this outstanding since Wreckless, and the replays rank among the most stunning ever. **DH B+**

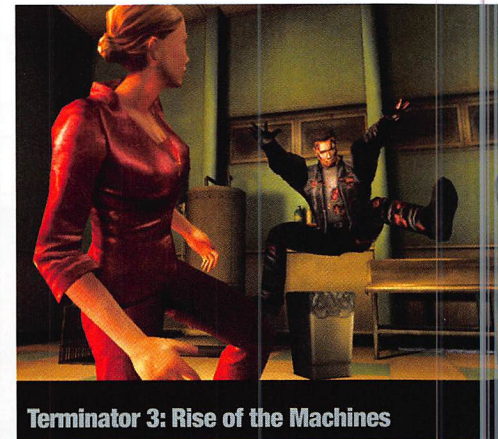
System: Xbox
Developer: Genki/Microsoft
Publisher: Majesco
Available: November



Mission: Impossible: Operation Surma

Mission: Impossible: Operation Surma contains all the staple components you might expect from a video game drawn from the movie's spy-thriller universe: lots of gadgets to toy around with, a casually fun story telling of world-threatening computer viruses, hi-tech facility infiltration, even a little (very cool) skydiving. And stealth—lots of it. Operation Surma has its bits of action, but the game relies on the sneaking around, the hiding in the shadows, the snapping of the necks, that sort of fun stuff. Or fun at least when the presentation's higher-shelf and the gameplay doesn't run into bouts of repetition and clunkiness. I normally don't mind a very specific, linear gameplay structure, I even invite it, but the ideas in the game don't work within this rigidity. **BF C+**

System: PlayStation 2 (reviewed), Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Paradigm
Publisher: Atari
Available: December



Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines

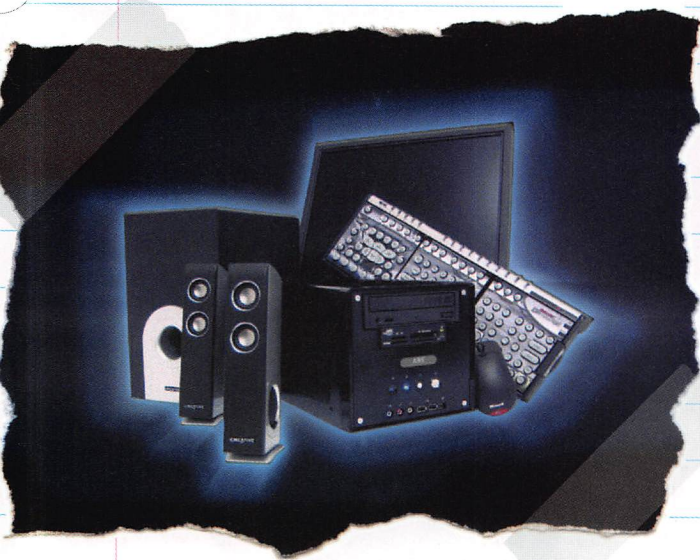
The T-X is on the hunt for John Connor, and you're on the hunt for the person who didn't warn you before you purchased this terribly constructed first-person shooter. For anyone still contemplating how much fun it would be to control Arnold through his Terminator 3 universe, destroying robots and saving the world, here's your warning: level structure barely approaches paint-by-numbers results; boring missions feature boring weapon impact; enemies have zero intelligence and drop dead by shots that don't even seem aimed in their direction; and a misplaced third-person fighting engine offers a few attacks to smash until your brain goes further numb. If you're still unsure, note the anemic character animation and poor modeling, which really don't get much worse in modern game design. **BF D-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Black Ops
Publisher: Atari
Available: November

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Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle

Preview

The final tale begins...



In the biggest invasion since the Brits changed rock, Korea is set to unload a parcel of software onto the U.S. PC- and console-playing public. The purveyors of the deed, NC Soft, showed up at last year's E3 with both barrels loaded and now are nearly ready to begin the onslaught.

First, a word about Korean game developers, having sat down with a few in preparation... For one, they create more art per game than any ten Japanese or American developers. Seen that Total commercial? Well, you'd have to eat many bowls. And they employ quite possibly the best original artists in the galaxy. The art on Crusaders, Lineage II, Strident and Exarch is the stuff I dream about laying down in ink as I sleep... when I sleep. They also take their time. Unlike U.S. development, where whether or not it's good, it's done on a certain date, Korean developers completely flesh out their every idea, integrating that love of art into the actual game. So the only question left is how good they are at progression, control and, most importantly, fun. We'll soon find out. For the most part, NC Soft have their sights fixed solely on the new frontier of 20th century gaming, the MMORPG market, where untold legions of human beings will spend their free time casting aside the whims of the past like watching TV, listening to music, reading, eating, getting married and bearing children to live vicariously through heroic men, women and fantastical creatures, imbedded into plights the normal man would never see or dream.

Lineage II, the prequel to the most popular online game in the world, will open the NC Soft portal by offering a user-friendly environment via a simple mouse-driven interface design philosophy built to help novices pick up movement and combat quickly while providing enough fat otherwise for

veteran gamers to chew as the game creeps up in battle complexity, politics and economic systems. The game relies on a modified version of Epic's Unreal engine (think this baby has enough miles on it yet?) for its juice to create a lifelike representation of Aden where monsters, characters and warfare look as good as possible, leaving enough power to pull off the all-important large-scale siege warfare, said to rival anything on console today. Detail must also be on par for the game's proposed viewpoints, placing soldiers on castle ramparts or even riding atop a dragon for a bird's eye view of the field—a lot of bells and whistles for an engine that spells the kiss of death for any FPS still desperate enough to tap it. Perhaps modified for MMORPG purposes is where it will truly shine. If the proof is in the pictures, well, it would certainly seem so.

Character classes available from the outset include human, elf (they must have a great union), dark elf, orc or dwarf, each with its own class tree that will enable players to develop their characters throughout the game. Each possesses, of course, different skills and abilities to be groomed accordingly between fighters and mystics. The Races & Classes portion of the game runs deep enough to send many a weekend warrior into a tirade of boss excuses; they may as well include them in the manual. While you can fight alone in Lineage II, if you so desire, a group battle system that encourages friendships such as a clan system based in medieval feudalism lets you gather for an adventure under a hunting party leader (any character can be a clan leader and any clan can own a castle, regardless of royal blood), the prerequisite being the





ability to lead, else face a revolt. Political, economic, morality and community systems round out all of the buzzwords I can think of off the top of my head.

Essentially, the goal is to cement NC Soft as a force to be reckoned with, setting the stage for Guild Wars (their free MMORPG from ArenaNet, formed by Warcraft and Starcraft alumni) and Exarch, which features designs by comic artisan Joe Madureira. The stage is set for an epic MMORPG battle in 2004 and beyond. Best be stocking up on liquid meals and catheters; that bold new era in gaming that's finally arrived seems to want to stay. **Dave Halverson**

Developer: NC Soft
Publisher: NC Soft
Available: Winter 2004

"The stage is set for an epic MMORPG battle in 2004 and beyond."

Scenes like this make me want to play online...badly.



LINEAGE II
THE CHAOTIC FRONTIER

Gothic II

Review

Gothic is back, bigger and slightly better

Online RTS games, MMORPGs and multiplayer FPS games are spawning practically by the thousands, but thanks to Atari and Piranha Bytes, you can play a fairly massive RPG without having to make friends with someone who uses the handle PiMpStAr. Gothic II is a game that tries to recapture the somewhat lost feeling of classic RPGs while opting for real-time fights over turn-based. Even though G2 sets out to accomplish quite a bit, it has varying degrees of success in achieving those goals.

The good? G2 is very non-linear. The quests and side quests multiply like the rabbits in that Visa check-card commercial, and can be done in almost any order or way that the player sees fit. Gothic II also has more sophisticated NPC AI reactions. What's this mean? It means no more strolling into a random house and robbing the owner blind. No one likes a thief. Also, attacking or even drawing a weapon on someone can elicit equally violent responses.

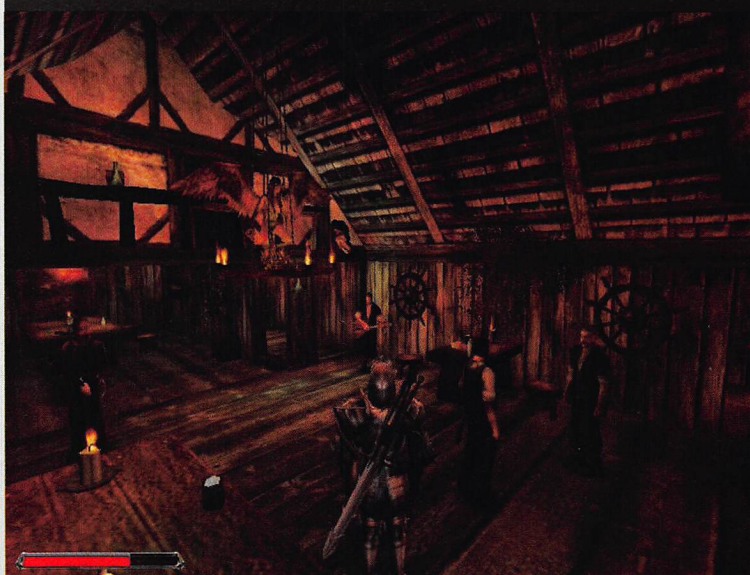
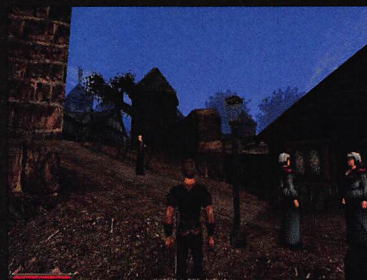
The bad? The controls are unrefined, to put it mildly. The words unresponsive and sluggish also come to mind. The rough controls and a somewhat spastic camera make the battles tougher than they need to be. Item management is very poorly implemented with muddled navigation and no way to customize your growing inventory.

The ugly? G2 won't be winning any beauty contests. With character models that look like they crawled off the Dreamcast, muddy textures and minor but frequent collision issues, this is not exactly a pretty game.

Gothic II may be a blessing for those looking for a large RPG to enjoy all by themselves, but be prepared for a decent amount of suffering while getting to the meatier parts of the game.

Christina Alexander C

Developer: Piranha Bytes
Publisher: Atari
Available: October



The Lord of the Rings: War of the Ring

Review

Not as strategic as you might expect

On paper, the thought of combining Tolkien's Middle Earth with real-time strategy sounded promising.

Hordes of Orcs battling legions of Elves and Dwarves—it was a formula destined for greatness and one that I was looking forward to. Sadly, War of the Ring falls short of its own ambition and ends up being just an ordinary RTS game with some familiar characters and locations. The game is split into two campaigns—Good and Evil—with each containing 10 missions. On the Good side, players actually learn how the Fellowship came together; it's kinda cool to see how Legolas and Gimli found their way to Rivendell. The flip side not only shows how Sauron's evil broke out of Dol Guldur, but also how he began building his armies in Mordor. For fans of the books, you'll see some parallels for the most part. The developers took it upon themselves to expand on the overall story and have done a great job. Where War of the Ring fumbles is in the actual gameplay itself, with the biggest culprit being the level design. I've never played such boring, miserable maps and areas. What's unfortunate is that the majority of the levels require little or no strategy on your part. Think RTS 101 and you'll get the idea—build up a defense, create a massive army, tack on some upgrades and then charge against the enemy—rinse then repeat. Granted, the AI is pretty intelligent and will give a decent level of challenge, but when the game doesn't force you to think outside



the box, it can get stale real quick. The inclusion of Fate Points was a nice touch (the more you fight, the more Fate Points you gain) and definitely stirs things up a bit. Fate Powers can be used to blind enemies, heal units and even summon creatures like the Balrog. The graphics paint a very cartoonish picture of Tolkien's world—with oversized weapons and disproportioned bodies—which some may like and some won't. They're incredibly detailed and nicely animated, but with our minds so wrapped around the films, it's hard to imagine these characters looking like this. In the end, it's hard to recommend War of the Ring as an RTS game over the current competition, but for LOTR fans and casual gamers, there might be something here for you.

Tom Ham C+

Developer: Liquid Entertainment
Publisher: VU Games
Available: November



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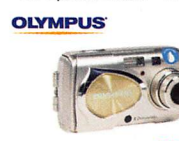
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Chrome

Review

Say Halo to my new little friend...

Waiting for Halo 2 got you counting pop-up windows instead of wounded? Looking for another reason to lock and load on distant worlds? You may not think Strategy First's answer to Halo quite on par...then again, you may think it better. Either way, it's close enough to register on the must-play scale with a vast sci-fi universe to explore, bounties to collect and an intriguing story that bears telling. So settle back, fire up the PC and prepare for take off.

Chrome begins with the proverbial feet-wetting recon mission, as protagonist Bolt Logan (played by Max McGill, the voice of Duke Nukem) and his partner and friend, Ron "Pointer" Hertz, two mercs for hire, set out to retrieve some top-secret intel from OCTOLAB, a huge research facility on the Zorg Moon, Helios. Within 20 minutes, amidst a lush forest covered in flowing knee-high greenery under a cumulus cloud-filled sky, you've wasted the better part of a dozen men (relieving them of any useful supplies), secured an enemy watchtower to lay down some protective sniper fire, infiltrated a lab, and scooted away on an alien hoverbike alongside a fine young female hacker named Carrie in a skintight jumpsuit. Did I mention that your buddy Ron stabbed you in the back, set you up so that you can never show your face again, and left you for dead? Well, he does...roll intro. Fast forward 10 years and it's just another day for the now decade-old partnership of Logan and Carrie, outlaw mercs for hire, forever at each other's throats.

In the year 2200, chrome isn't just for old car bumpers anymore; it's the Valkyria system's most precious commodity, the proverbial cheese for mega corporations who will stop at nothing to control it. Espionage, sabotage, murder...the whole system's like one big hotbed of corruption—in other words, mercenary heaven. After setting the stage, the game really begins to blossom. The very next mission—an hour-plus-long trek that takes Logan through more maneuvers than many entire games—introduces Implants: bio-cybernetic devices imbedded into living tissue to enhance performance and change the limitations of the body. At first, Logan's new to them,

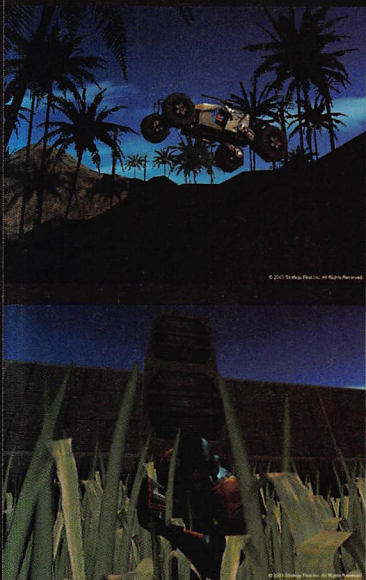
so they overload frequently, causing him to buckle and nearly black out; however, once assimilated, they can really make a difference in battle and/or staying out of it. You'll also be managing a realistic quiver of guns, ammo, explosives and healing supplies. Rather than allow Logan to carry everything he finds, he can only carry what he's got room for. Do I drop my pulse rifle for the sniper rifle and rely on pistols for close combat? Load up more on grenades or health packs? All totaled, there are some 15-plus guns, rifles, launchers, you name it, to call your own. Not to be outdone, commandeering vehicles like speeders, four-wheelers and even mechs is also on the menu. While I'm not wild about controlling any of these by keypad (although my Belkin Nostromo is really coming in handy these days), they're all integrated into the game with surprising adeptness. I thought it would be a lot harder and take a lot longer for anyone to battle Halo and Deus Ex, let alone look as good, but Chrome plays as well much of the time and looks better than either. If nothing else, the visuals in Chrome will keep you glued to the display. I'm not digging the facial structures so much, but everything else weighs in on the grand side of the scale. Rag doll is used to great effect throughout, the texture work is near perfection and the environments are the stuff of moon-age daydreams. You'll need an ass-kicker system to run it properly (P41.5ghz, 64 MB video card, 1.7 gigs free and a Radeon 9000 or GeForce 3 chipset recommended), but hey, who's looking this way with anything less?

Dave Halverson B+

Developer: Strategy First
Publisher: Techland Software
Available: October

"...a vast sci-fi universe to explore, bounties to collect and an intriguing story..."





Either the world's smallest man or
tallest grass...either way,
impressive stuff.



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Sword of Mana

Review

Portable action-RPGs never looked so good



If you were among the many who thought the last Mana incarnation, Legend of Mana on the PlayStation, was a letdown, good news has arrived from the hallowed halls of Square Enix in the form of Sword of Mana. Sword retains almost everything that was good about Legend and dumps everything that was bad, rejuvenating the series and creating one of the more compelling action-RPGs in recent memory. The enjoyment begins with a full-featured adventure backed by a solid game engine; forget about the disjointed, episodic nature of Legend and bask in Sword's lengthy main quest, as well as countless optional side quests. The game also offers visual and aural splendor that is virtually unmatched on the GBA, infused with amazing designs and a rare organic feel. A vast assortment of weapons and magic keep things interesting,

and deep systems let you customize your character and his/her equipment as you see fit. A few aspects prevent the game from being truly great—there's a lot of unsightly scroll tearing, the menus are cumbersome and, most significantly, there's no cooperative play. The lack of multiplayer is especially rough since your AI partners have all the intelligence of your average oak tree. Sword of Mana comes up a few steps short of being the Mana sequel we were all hoping for, but it's still a fun ride. **Chris Hoffman B**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Brownie Brown
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: December



Metroid: Zero Mission

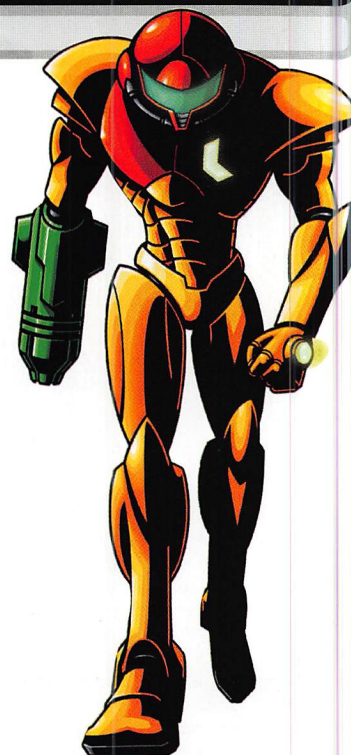
Preview

Samus Aran returns to her roots



The prospect of a remake of the original NES Metroid, enhanced with better graphics and modern game-design philosophy, is already exciting enough, but now that Nintendo has revealed even more details about Metroid: Zero Mission, we're quivering with anticipation. Using the Metroid Fusion engine, Zero Mission returns players to Planet Zebes where they can look forward to the essential gameplay and world that made the original so compelling, now strengthened with added story components and new enemies like a giant worm that follows heroin Samus Aran during her early exploration of planet Zebes. Classic items like the long beam, morph ball and ice beam will be around to update Samus' arsenal, along with weapons that didn't exist in the original, like Super Missiles. Other changes include an in-game map and the ability to hang from ledges. But most exciting of all? The game continues past Mother Brain, revealing a whole new chapter of adventure where Samus explores the Chozo civilization and needs to survive without her power suit. The full NES version may even be hidden in the game as well. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: February



King of Fighters EX 2: Howling Blood

[Review](#)

Scaled down for the GBA, but still packing a huge punch



I know I wrote this last month in my KOF PS2 review, but it's something worth repeating: King of Fighters provides some of the finest fighting gameplay ever. Even though SNK's premier fighting series has been scaled down for the GBA, The King of Fighters EX 2 still retains the wide variety of characters, excellent controls and serious 2D fighting fun that the franchise is known for. True, it wasn't that long ago that the first KOF EX hit the GBA, but compared to this sequel, that game seems like amateur hour in the programming department. The presentation has been improved dramatically, with a stronger challenge, better backgrounds, an enhanced story and vastly improved audio. New characters have been added, and the game also handles better—not only are special moves more responsive, but EX 2 has a much-appreciated button config—resulting

in a product that just feels more like KOF. However, all these enhancements on the gameplay and aesthetic levels come at a price: the game has fewer modes than its predecessor, and the striker characters have been nixed from the roster. (Whatever teammate hasn't entered combat yet acts as the striker.) At the end of the day, though, KOF EX 2 ends up being another highly polished title in a fantastic series. If you're into fighting games, you can't go wrong here.

Chris Hoffman

System: Game Boy Advance

Developer: Sun-Tec

Publisher: Atlus

Available: December

Double Dragon Advance

[Review](#)

Enter the dragon all over again



Double Dragon Advance delivers exactly the kind of action you'd expect from a title bearing the name of the classic arcade game, and speaking as a fan of old-school beat-'em-ups, that's definitely a good thing. The folks at Million and Atlus have taken everything that was fun about Double Dragon back in the day and kicked it up by several notches. DD has always been about the sheer visceral fun of beating the crap out of waves of dumb punks, and that's still true here, only this time, it's been made better by the addition of many new moves that not only pump up the variety factor, but allow for some very cool combo possibilities and slightly more strategic fighting. Fulfilling diversity comes by way of new levels and added enemies (some of whom appear to have been recently punching the daylight out Keanu Reeves), and the

story elements, co-op mode and rocking retro soundtrack are much appreciated. As much as DD die-hards will dig it, the non-initiated should take note: the visuals are a bit antiquated, and the slightly floaty action lacks the bone-crunching, impactful feel of superior brawlers like Final Fight. Once you accept these straight-from-the-arcade facets (and if you ignore the pointless single-player bonus mode), you'll be partying like it's 1987 all over again.

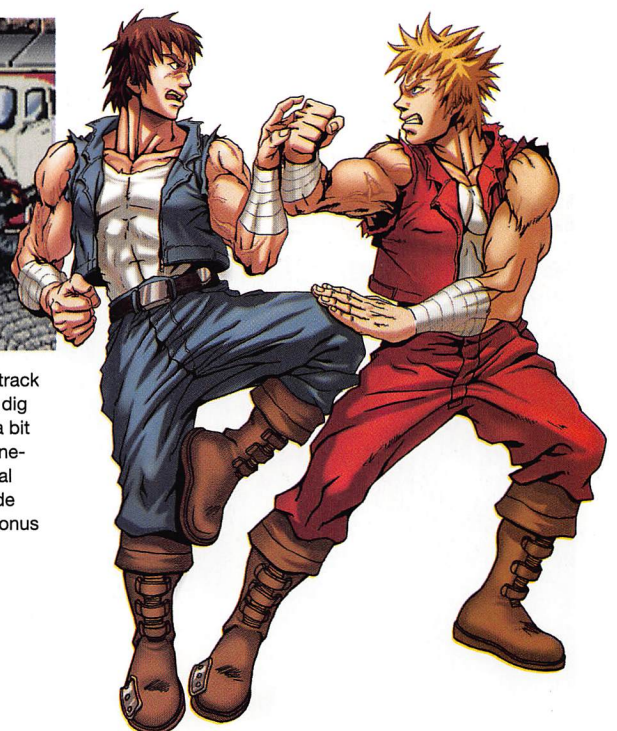
Chris Hoffman

System: Game Boy Advance

Developer: Million

Publisher: Atlus

Available: November



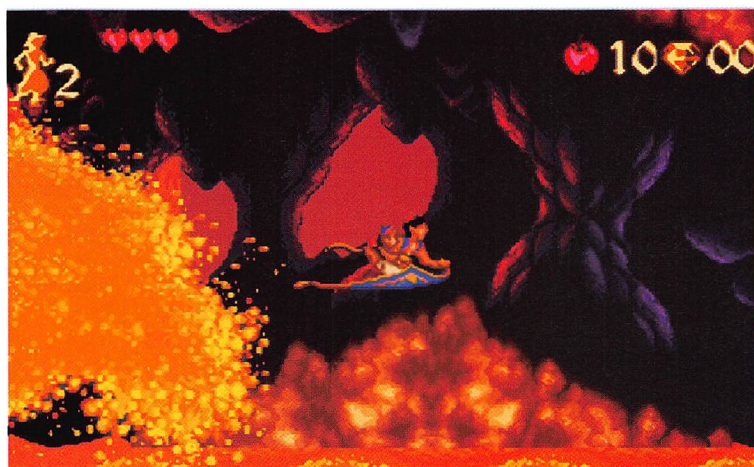
Disney's Aladdin

Review

While it never received the acclaim of Shiny's Genesis game of the same name, Capcom's 16-bit Aladdin title, now ported to the GBA, certainly can hold its own. At its best, Aladdin is a platforming powerhouse, where the would-be prince strings his jumps, swings, dodges, hops and bounces into poetry in motion. When you get the timing and patterns down, it's a thing of beauty. The problem that this game has always had is in its play balance; the game reaches its peak around the middle of the game (in the Cave of Wonders and inside the Genie's lamp), and subsequent levels lack the intense platforming, replacing it with fairly easy combat. That's not to say it isn't fun—it certainly is—just that it clearly could have been better. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Capcom

Publisher: Capcom
Available: January



Mega Man Battle Chip Challenge

Review

Mega Man Battle Chip Challenge is a game that is flawed from its most basic concept. Though I certainly appreciate Capcom trying to do something different with the Mega Man Battle Network universe, stripping away all the gameplay elements except for menu navigation and inventory management is really not the best route to inspired gameplay. All you do in MMBCC is acquire weapons and power-ups (battle chips) and strategically equip your character with them before each fight; the battles themselves play out automatically. To make matters worse, the actual managing of your chips is cumbersome; why can't you save and load your favorite chip sets? I suppose MMBCC pulls off the light strategy it's attempting well enough, but I'm afraid that doesn't make it any more fun to play. **Chris Hoffman C-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Inticreates

Publisher: Capcom
Available: January



Spyro: Attack of the Rhynocs

Review

Spyro spends so much time gathering miscellaneous items in Spyro: Attack of the Rhynocs that you'd think he was a garbage collector rather than a platforming superstar. There are enemies to incinerate and platforms to jump on, but that's just secondary to the gargantuan mass of gems, toys, machine parts, vegetables, badges and so much more that fills the game's world. This makes for relaxing but somewhat bland gameplay; ironically, the minigames pack much more excitement and challenge. And although the game looks quite good, the isometric perspective leads to some problematic collision, and the controls could have been a bit tighter. The latest Spyro could have been much worse, but with similar games like Banjo-Kazooie offering better, deeper gameplay, it's a bit tough to recommend. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Digital Eclipse

Publisher: VU Games
Available: November



Yu Yu Hakusho: Spirit Detective

Review

I've never seen the Yu Yu Hakusho anime, and after playing this game, I really don't want to. If the game is any indication, being a spirit detective means you gain access to some of the limpest-looking, collision-impaired fighting techniques ever devised and get to spend your time running around large but haphazardly designed environments, usually following your radar on an insipid fetch quest. Both the fighting and exploration are poorly executed, and the visuals look like they leapt right out of a medium-quality NES title. Even minigames and multiple playable characters add little value, and the story comes across completely random for the uninitiated. Perhaps I should hire a spirit detective to see what happened to the fun that was supposed to be in this game. Then again, maybe not. **Chris Hoffman D**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Sensory Sweep/Screaming Games

Publisher: Atari
Available: December



SPORTS

NFL Street

preview

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox
Developer: EA Tiburon

Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: January 2004

It was bound to happen. With the success EA Sports Big has had with their phenomenal NBA Street franchise, it was a no-brainer that they would branch out into another sport. Developed by the same talented crew behind Madden, their latest concoction is NFL Street. Combining fast-paced arcade action with a hip-hop, street attitude, the game is all about showing off, hard hits and no referees. One thing is for sure: the sport of football will never be the same.

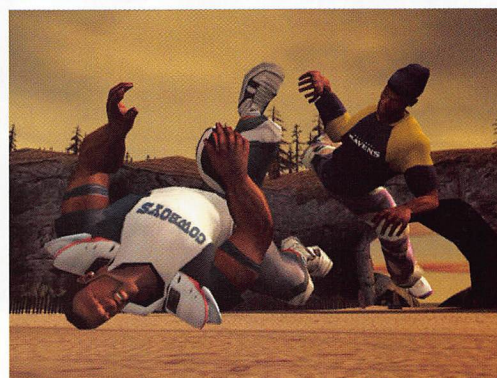
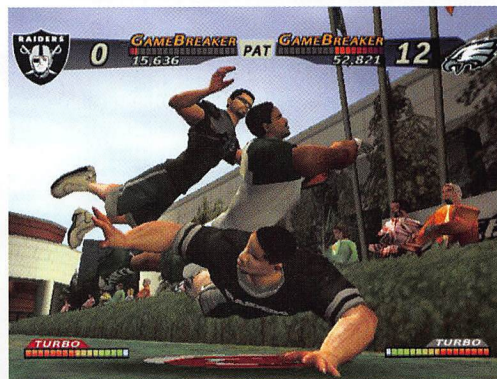
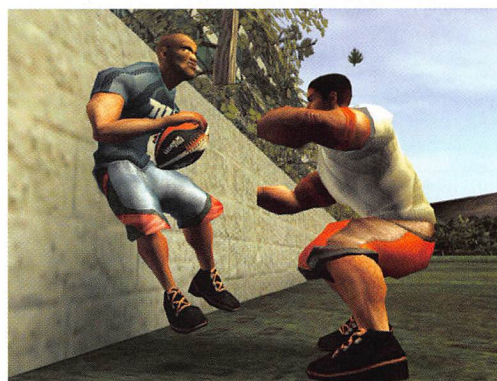
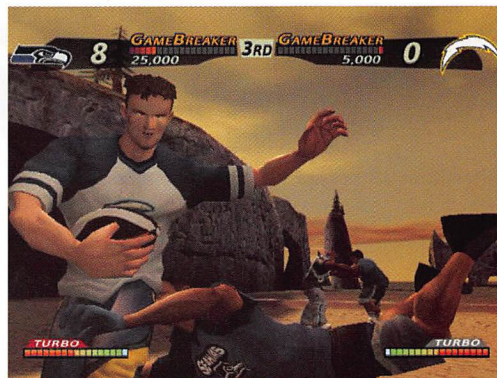
Throw away everything you know about conventional football—the complex plays, passing routes and the plethora of formations. Where in the real game, it comes down to strategy over style, in NFL Street, it's the other way around. Games are 7-on-7 (not 11-on-11) and the same team plays both offense and defense. There are no helmets or pads in NFL Street, so unsportsmanlike conduct and tackles into the wall are par for the course. All of the 32 NFL teams are represented and players get to pick their team from a pool of 10 to 12 available players. With only three gameplay modes, most of your time will be spent in the NFL Challenge mode. Here players will build their custom team by completing over 200 challenges. Quick Game and Pick Up game round out the remaining modes in NFL Street. Of course, PS2 players will be able to play online.

Anyone who has played NBA Street is familiar with the popular Gamebreaker move. You'll be happy to know that it's made its way onto NFL Street as well. Similar to NBA Street, as players play through their game, they will start to accrue points. Players earn points by showboating, executing a hard hit or using a lot of laterals. After your Gamebreaker meter is maxed out, you can select which player will now be "in the zone." That player from now on will be virtually unstoppable. What's cool is that the Gamebreaker lasts as long as you retain possession of the ball. Throw an interception or fumble and it's gone.

What I liked about the gameplay in NFL Street was how fast it was. Where in NBA Street, players can definitely start a rhythm going, here the faster you move down the field, the faster you can build up your Gamebreaker meter. Even though the playbooks are cut down drastically—you can choose from running, passing and trick—it works surprisingly well.

And just like NBA Street (and pretty much all of the EA Sports Big titles), NFL Street is going to have a bumping soundtrack. Courtesy of EA Sports Trax, some of the artists include Lostprophets, Wylde Bunch, Fuel, Good Charlotte and Killer Mike, among others I can't talk about just now.

Tom Ham



"One thing is for sure: the sport of football will never be the same."

Technology has, for the most part, not been kind to the most physically demanding sport on the planet. Motocross games, it turns out, are extremely difficult to make. There have been brave attempts like 989's Supercross Circuit and EA's Supercross 2000 for 64 bit, and more recently Pacific Coast Power & Light's two Carmichael iterations, but the quintessential motocross experience has yet rear its mud-soaked head.

That, as they say, is about to change. Currently, heavy hitters THQ and Activision both have their hands in big-budget franchise-minded motocross games, utilizing two of the world's best extreme racing game makers to get them there: Rainbow Studios (ATV Offroad Fury, Splashdown) for THQ's MX Unleashed, and Left Field (Excitebike 64) for Activision's MTX Mototrax.

MTX Mototrax

preview

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Left Field

Publisher: Activision
Available: March

Dropping in on Activision producer Jeff Poffenbargerto to get a first-hand look at MTX, I was amazed at how much research went in before the name went on. Working closely with Left Field, the team have left nothing to chance, having looked at pretty much every motocross game in existence before cooking up their game's framework, in terms of available modes, progression and a no-nonsense front end. These guys know where all the pitfalls are (and if anyone should know where the Pitfalls are, it's Activision) and don't intend to fall into a single one, choosing a streamlined full career—comprehensive but not cumbersome—and a freestyle venue (to include a plethora of interactive environments, including Travis Pastrana's compound for the mechanically insane) as the game's catalysts.

Albeit standard in form, it's function that counts, and the Activision brain trust have put a lot of thought into keeping things moving, on and off the track. The non-linear career mode leaves much in the hands of the user, deciding venue, expenses and upgrades as you assail the 125, 250 and 500cc ranks through the rigors of both Supercross and motocross events, while the

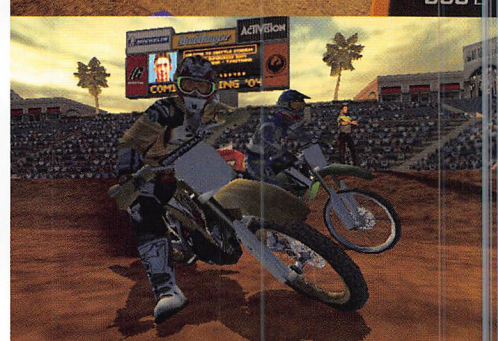
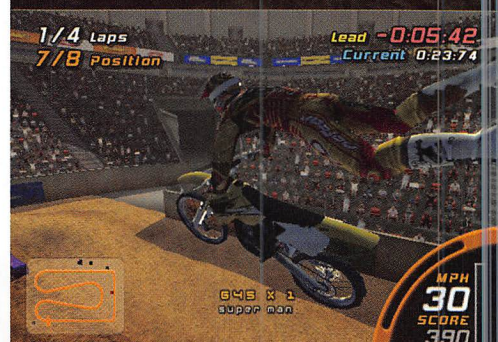
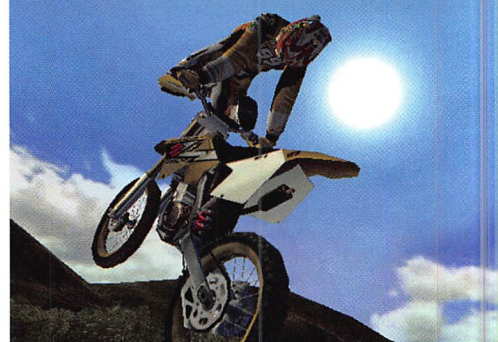
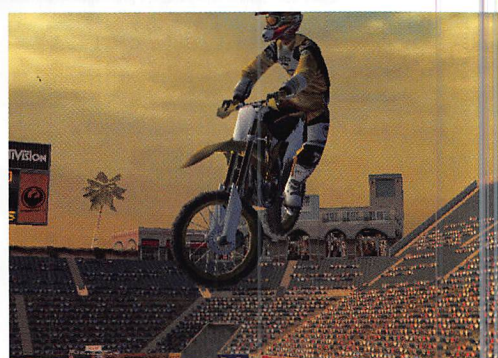
freestyle mode is definitely built for fun, along with free ride—attainable as you rack up experience and open it up. Leaving nothing to chance, they've also created the world's most user-friendly track editor along with the ability to go online and see how many friends you can sucker into getting toasted on your home track. About the only thing MTX doesn't do is throw dirt on your lap, and they're probably cooking up ways to do that right now. A lot of bells and whistles for sure, but according to Poffenbargerto, none of it has taken away from the most important aspects of the game: physics, rider animation, flow, frame rate and, of course, graphics. You can have a mode to win a date with Britney, but if the game sucks it may as well be Rosie.

Using a traditional pre-loading system aided by a clutch, MTX is designed in such a way that no matter how rough the terrain, through practice, course memorization and, of course, skills, you can become one with the topography, developing the kind of rhythm that motocross games live or die by. My demo was strictly paws off, but judging by what I saw on screen, MTX is going to be nearly impossible to beat. **Dave Halverson**



Travis Pastrana's the marquee name on this one, with Kenny Bartram, Carey Hart and more set to join the fun.

"About the only thing MTX doesn't do is throw dirt on your lap..."



MX Unleashed

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Rainbow Studios

Publisher: THQ

Available: January

preview

MX Unleashed is headed exactly where I thought it might, following closely in ATV's footsteps. Applying a two-wheeled experience to their secret formula for fluid fun, Rainbow have essentially created racing heroin. I almost wish I could erase ATV from my memory in the interest of feeling the ebbs and flows of their amazing AI for the first time all over again.

That said, Rainbow have added some great touches to Unleashed in the transition, including all-new two-wheeled physics to give it a feel all its own. Still, the emphasis, as with all of Rainbow's creations, leans more towards arcade fun than simulation complexity. Aside from the clutch, the key to victory in Unleashed lies squarely on the left analog/gas combination. Also in league with ATV, Rainbow keep the tracks wide and desolate, with an emphasis on speed and natural beauty over set dressing and low-speed tactics. You won't be slamming your bike into any tight hairpins, jamming up traffic here; in fact, as of this preview, the riders don't even stick their legs out to do so. There's not a spectator or race van in sight at the Nationals either, and the stadium events, while treacherous enough, are pretty much high-speed venues. One must also consider that this is still a preview. For all I know, they could roll in a quiver of factory sponsors by race time, although at 85 percent complete, I wouldn't hold my breath. Besides, what could be better than two AAA MX racers in Q1, each great in their own respect? Anyone with a Visa and a propensity for speed would be nuts to pass on either. Having been down this road a few times, expect the kitchen sink in DVD form on this one, including a top 100 seeded career starring 20+ pro riders (or the option to build your own, tweaking bike, rider and every piece of gear imaginable), a seriously friggin' cool Freeworld mode to lord over (race trains, helicopters and more) and cutting-edge technology like independent bike and rider animations. They've also licensed one of the best collective soundtracks ever in an extreme venue. With ATV, Star Wars: Racer Revenge and Splashdown: Rides Gone Wild under their belt, it's anyone's guess where Rainbow will go after Unleashed, but rest assured, speed will definitely be on the menu. **Dave Halverson**



"...an emphasis on speed and natural beauty over set dressing and low-speed tactics."



Airheads.

ESPN College Hoops

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Visual Concepts/Kush Games

Publisher: Sega Sports
Available: November

After putting out a near-flawless pro game last month, Sega is taking it to the rim with their latest college b-ball title. What's hot this year? The Legacy Mode. The development team have taken the typical franchise/dynasty game and brought it to an unheard-of level. In addition to the usual aspects—such as coaching, strategizing and managing—players can get into high school recruiting as well. With the help of your assistant coaches (that you hire), you'll be able to scout high school players, invite them to visit your school and even make scholarship offers. The better your team does during its season, the better quality players you'll be able to recruit. Imagine acquiring a star player and then building the rest of the team around that particular player. All the drama, excitement and passion of college basketball is fully realized with ESPN College Hoops.

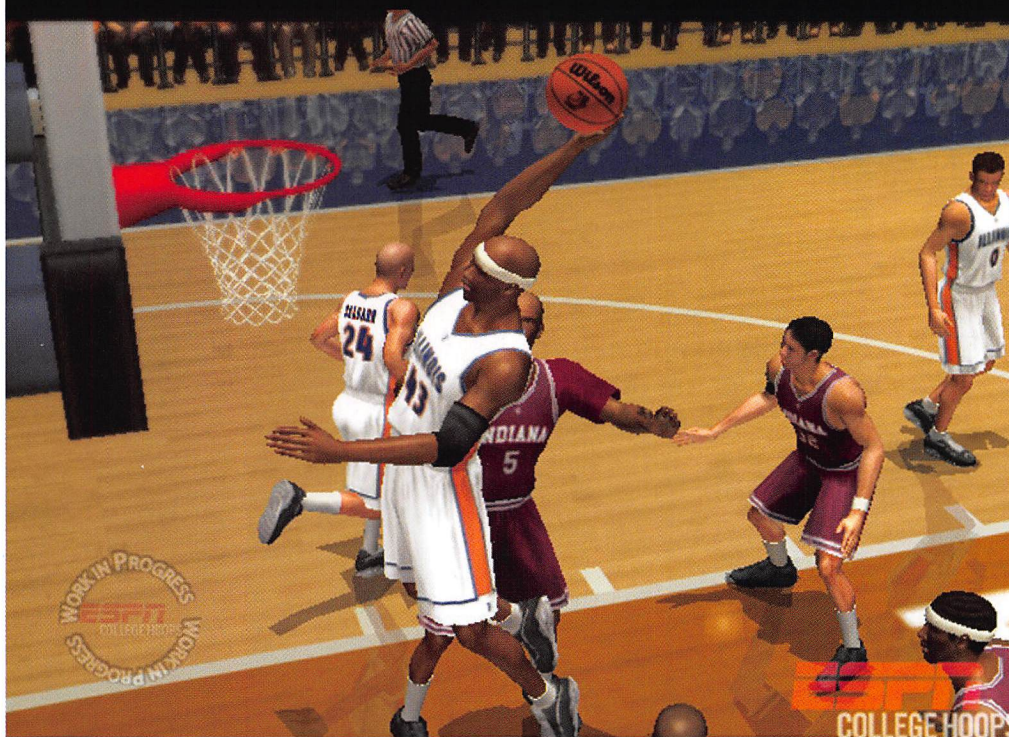
The new Slam Session is another key component of this solid title. Players pick from a host of dunks and then execute the proper button commands to make the slam. The harder the dunk, the longer and more complicated the button sequences. You'll never forget the first time you nail a between-the-legs slam combined with a 360. Booya! And if you think you've got game, players can go online and play Slam Session against the best in the country.

For the most part, the gameplay and computer AI

is excellent—defenses change up regularly (from zone to box to man-to-man to full-court), passing lanes are blocked and exploited and point guards know how to work the outside. There were times when AI players would run out of bounds for no apparent reason or shoot a jumper from half-court (with plenty of time left). Granted, this didn't happen often, but enough times to make me notice. Iso-Motion makes its way over from the NBA game with a few changes. The right analog stick now handles the offensive AND defensive moves (such as swiping the ball)—definitely a lot more intuitive than the NBA game.

Colleg Hoops excels in the sound department too. Not only does it have the fight songs for virtually all of the major schools in the game, the developers have even included chants from the crowd. The dynamic reaction of the crowd to what's going on in the game is also a major plus. On the flipside, the play-by-play commentary could've used a once-over. Handled by ESPN's Mike Patrick and Jay Bilas, many of their comments were not only late but had little or no bearing on what was going on.

If you're looking for the best overall college basketball game on the market, ESPN College Hoops is definitely the way to go. Although EA's game is solid, it can't touch this. **Tom Ham A**



ESPN NHL Hockey

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Visual Concepts/Kush Games
Publisher: Sega Sports
Available: September

Yeah, I know, this review is a little late (sorry, I goofed), but to paraphrase a saying, good games come to those who wait. Last year, Sega showed us that they're no slouch when it came to hockey games with their stellar NHL 2K3. Boasting a great Franchise Mode and brilliant AI (almost too good), 2K3 gave the competition (namely EA) a run for its money. For this year, Sega has gone back to its roots and has developed a hockey game that is pure perfection. From the improved visuals to the excellent pacing to the fantastic commentary, ESPN NHL Hockey is a must for any hockey fan.

Borrowing from their ESPN NFL Football game, ESPN NHL Hockey now has its own version of the Crib called the Skybox. Just like before, players are issued various challenges during their gameplay. Once met, players are rewarded tokens that can be used to purchase unlockable items such as historical jerseys, classic teams, goalie masks and mini-games. Players can also track their records and stats in the Skybox too. Will the casual player worry about it? Probably not. But for any hardcore hockey fan, the Skybox will be hallowed ground.

It's no secret that NHL 2K3 wasn't the prettiest hockey game out there. Sure it had great gameplay, but the visuals were lackluster when compared to EA's. This year, the developers have totally retooled the graphics engine—improved textures, smoothed out the animations and facial models—and the end result is simply stunning. The ice itself has gotten a facelift as well. Not only does it showcase some pretty cool particle effects, but it will actually degrade as the game progresses. The arenas have an equally impressive impact as well—complete with wobbly Plexiglas and screaming fans.

But the true star of the ESPN NHL Hockey is the play-by-play commentary. Courtesy of ESPN's Gary Thorne and Bill Clement, this is some of the best commentary I've ever heard in a hockey game. Unlike other hockey games where the comments are lagging behind the action, the voice work is always on top of the action. Thorne and Clement even have player-specific discussions and cool bits of trivia. Simply brilliant. **Tom Ham A**



All-Star Baseball 2005

preview

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Acclaim Studios Austin

Publisher: Acclaim
Available: February 2004

Ah...January. Just as the football season is coming to a close, it's time to think about the great American pastime, baseball. And when I think of the one baseball title that I look forward to every year, it is Acclaim's All-Star Baseball series. Since its first appearance on the N64 back in 1998, the All-Star Baseball series has continued to push the envelope in all areas including graphics, realism, gameplay and features. Their latest, All-Star Baseball 2005 is poised to take baseball games to an all-new level, bringing with it exclusive features, new modes and, finally, head-to-head online play.

With every new baseball game, developers want to show off a new technology or innovation. EA Sports did it last year with their new pitching interface, Inside Pitch had online play and Sega's World Series Baseball had the deepest dynasty mode of the bunch. For All-Star Baseball 2005, Acclaim is introducing something pretty damn cool—Total Control Batting. Borrowing the swing mechanism from EA's Tiger Woods game, to swing at the ball, players just hold back the right analog stick and swing forward when they want to hit it. The batting cursor has been taken out (although you can put it back in), so now, just like real baseball, it's about timing your swing—not aiming for a cursor. To give players the ultimate in control, you can open or close your stance, hit for power or hit for average and even perform check swings. I can see it now. Other developers will get wind of this and incorporate it into their baseball games as well.

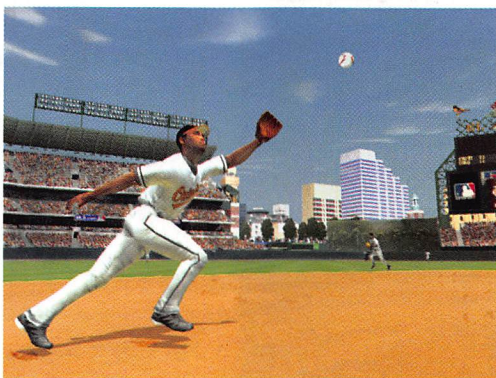
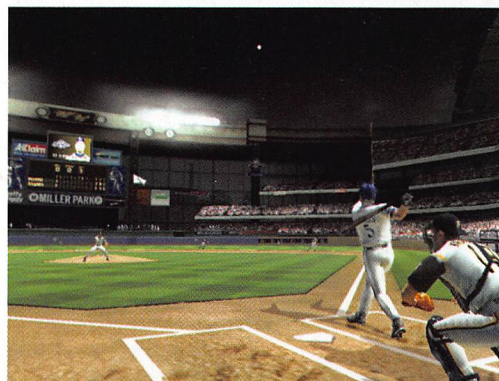
Sega's World Series Baseball game really conveyed the excitement of baseball through its use of great in-game cameras and cut-sequences. The partnership with ESPN has really paid off because all of their sports have broadcast-quality transitions. For All-Star Baseball 2005, the developers are introducing two new cameras—the Fieldercam and Broadcastcam. The Fieldercam brings the camera right behind the fielder, so players will be able to check out the detailed running, jumping and catching animations. As soon as the ball is hit, a flashing group of circles will indicate which direction the ball is coming and at what speed. The closer the ball is to the fielder, the faster the circles will flash. I can see where the developers are

going with this, but at this early stage...it doesn't quite work right. The whole dynamic of it all is a little on the slow side. On the flipside, the Broadcastcam is a nice addition. Players are treated to swooping shots of the field, players and the stadium—ESPN, eat your heart out.

Another huge improvement lies in the visuals. The All-Star Baseball series has always prided itself with having great player models and animations, and for 2005, they've taken the graphics to the next level. Not only are player's faces nicely modeled, these are the best-looking ballparks I've ever seen. After playing a few innings, I noticed a major improvement with the player's transition animations. Fielders scooped up grounders and then threw the ball to the nearest base in one smooth motion. It was spectacular.

Other key features for All-Star Baseball 2005 include a brand-new franchise mode, 2003 Scenario Mode (so all of you Cubs fans can finally have your team go to the World Series), 80 Hall of Famers, Spring Training, Expansion Mode and, of course, online head-to-head gameplay.

Tom Ham



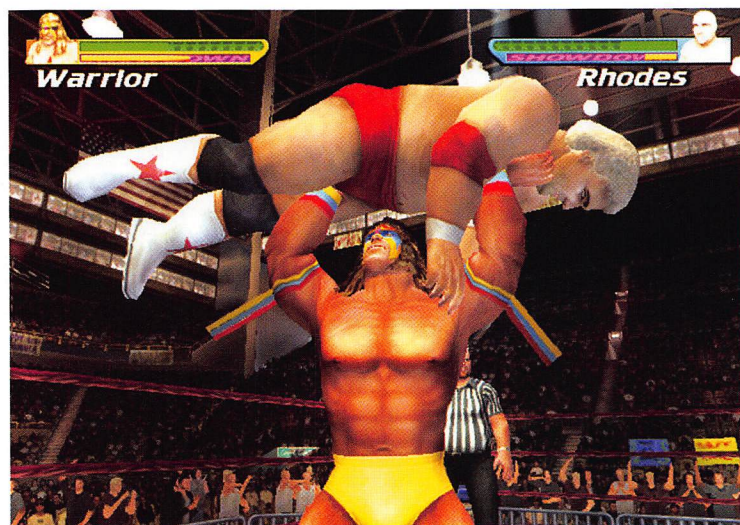
"...All-Star Baseball 2005 is poised to take baseball games to an all-new level..."

Showdown: Legends of Wrestling

The ultimate wrestling game?

Ultimate Interview: The Ultimate Warrior Speaks

Few professional wrestlers can claim to have left as big a mark on the industry as the Ultimate Warrior. Bursting onto the scene in the late 1980s, the Ultimate Warrior emerged at the pinnacle of the business when he defeated Hulk Hogan for the WWF championship at WrestleMania VI. The Warrior has had a long history with Acclaim, going back to 1990's WWF WrestleMania Challenge on the NES, and now he has returned as one of the premiere stars of Showdown: Legends of Wrestling. In his first interview in more than five years, the Warrior spoke to **play** about the game, where he's been, and what the future may hold.



Call it a gimmick switch for Legends of Wrestling. Having taken a long, hard look at previous games in the series, Acclaim is introducing significant changes to the next entry—entitled Showdown: Legends of Wrestling—and all of them appear to be for the better. The meter-rific ISP system is now history, replaced by an intuitive “ready to brawl” scheme of strikes, grapples and quick attacks that can only draw comparisons to Aki's wrestling titles. The visuals, though still lively and colorful, have been reinvented to look crisper and less caricatured, while an era-based story mode has also been added, in which characters will participate in a wide range of storylines and actually evolve in appearance to go with the times. Other changes include new motion-captured animations, real stadiums and, of course, additions to the character roster, now coming in at over 70 strong. Acclaim's latest could finally be a game worthy of its legendary name. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Acclaim Studios Austin
Publisher: Acclaim
Available: April 2004





play: First of all, I'd like to clarify about your name a little bit. I was just told to refer to you as Warrior, and your legal name is Warrior, but in the game you're going by Ultimate Warrior and I was wondering about the details of that.

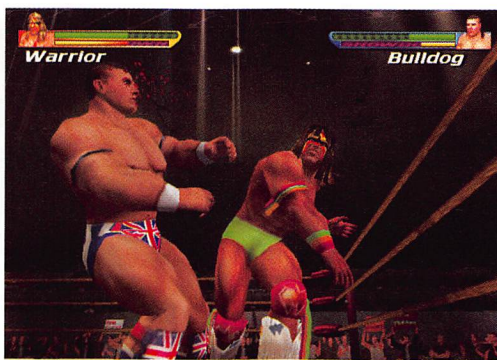
Ultimate Warrior: In '98 I went back to work in WCW as just Warrior. The Ultimate was dropped off. I was in the middle of my litigation with Titansports at the time and Pat Patterson and another guy by the name of Jerry Brisco there filed false affidavits saying that they had come up with Ultimate to attach in front of Warrior and that wasn't the story that came out in the end...one of the conditions when I prevailed in the litigation was that Ultimate came back to me. So, that's why. But my legal name IS Warrior, and there's a long, I think, endearing and empowering story behind that. I don't think I need to get into it here, but my name has been just the one name of Warrior since '93. My wife has it as her surname, and my kids have it as their surname. It's what I go by. It's what's on my driver's license; it's what I pay taxes under.

For those who are unaware, what has the Warrior been doing for the last five years, since we last saw you in the ring?

Well, in '98, when I went to WCW, after things fell out over there...I had a short-term contract with them, and most people know by now, the true story has come out, management was in disarray. When I went over there I had an agreement with them that I was going to continue to do the Warrior character, but I had a plan to take it to a whole 'nother different level creatively. I think the first time I was on television is evidence of that. I did a whole good versus evil spiel that lasted 15 minutes and the ratings went up every 15 seconds, but by then, entertainment in general, but specifically sports entertainment, had decided it was just gonna go with whatever the lowest common denominator of human behavior was and they didn't want to put the effort in it. At that point in time, me and my wife decided that we were gonna start having a family and...you know, while I was off, I continued to invest in myself...knowing that one day I was going to have to have another career. And that career ended up being going out and speaking and using what I used to do and then going out and talking about different stuff.

What made you decide in particular to get into motivational speaking?

Well, I mean, I had to have another career! Going clear back to the first time of three times I had a fallout with Vince McMahon of Titansports, I never doubted that I could do something else if I just set my mind to it and I made the efforts and I learned. I've always been a motivating guy, I've always been a positive guy, I've always motivated people just naturally. That came through in the Ultimate Warrior character. So I just stood back for a minute and I looked at it and what I did in professional wrestling, of course, inside the ring was a display of my physicality and that physical energy. That's what captured people's attention and that's what helped make that character successful. And I thought, what more powerful thing to do than a guy who can press 300-pound people over his head, made a successful career out of it, what more impressive thing than to go out, show kids that, get their attention, and then say, "Power in your life comes from knowledge"? And so I developed a speaking platform doing that at first.



So how did you become involved in Showdown: Legends of Wrestling?

Brian. [Legends of Wrestling brand manager] Brian Shields. He came to me with the first game...but at the time, just to be point blank, the numbers weren't right. The numbers weren't right for me to do it, and it didn't have anything to do with analyzing or critiquing the quality of the game or where they were at. And also over the course of two or three years, I came to realize that this Legends game is serious business to them. It's serious business to them. Other companies out there are making it an aside, and they're making it an aside because they know Acclaim is the best at it.

Now, there was an announcement that you were going to be in a competing wrestling game and then that turned out to be false. Can you explain that a bit?

My financial advisor guy that I've had since 1984, when I made like \$20,000 my first year in wrestling working in Texas, he knew a guy that knew somebody at THQ, and we had a conversation, and from that conversation, there were a bunch of people at the company who got ahead of themselves and started talking stuff. And, in fact, no conversations went any further than that. As soon as I heard they were talking beyond themselves, that they were talking about stuff they shouldn't be talking about, that was enough for me. You know, people will say it's not about the money... It is about the money, in a sense! There's no crime in that. But at the same time, I've made a lot of sacrifices standing on principle. When I see aspects of the way people operate their company or operate their business or a person conducts himself, I gotta take that into account. Because what it could lead to down the road is people taking certain liberties that's gonna lead to a whole can of worms. I had a five-year litigation with Titansports. It was like a David versus Goliath. It sucked so many different things out of me, psychically, financially, everything. So many times along the way, you wanna quit, but the only thing that keeps you going are your principles, and recognizing that it's never wrong to fight for what is right.

Indeed. What makes the Ultimate Warrior a Legend of Wrestling?

Ultimate Warrior had a unique career at a unique time, and captured the fans' hearts and minds and souls in a very unique way and nobody will ever be able to do that. There are certain standards that the Ultimate Warrior set that whenever anybody else, whenever other people rise up to them or try those things out, there's an immediate comparison to the Ultimate Warrior, or the idea of the Ultimate Warrior. I always kept working at how I was going to do that more through my promos and everything else. I mean, everything fit together. And of course, the highlight of my career, the premiere match of all time that people wish didn't exist, was my match with Hogan.

Back to the game a bit more...do you play video games?

I don't play video games. I don't watch a lot of TV. My interests are just different from other people. I always try to get up and stay active and something that's making me a better individual, making me a better individual, making me smarter, making me more capable to think and figure out my life.

So you haven't seen much of the game yet?

I haven't seen anything. I've seen what they put up over there at their site. But I mean, I hear about it. It's incredible, the kind of stuff that they can do in the video games today.

Definitely. Are there any classic match-ups you've had that you can't wait to see re-created in the Legends of Wrestling game?

I...God...I had...I think everybody's dead. Ha ha ha ha! Just any dead guy

Curt Hennig?

I'm just joking. You can quote me on that if you want. It's kind of funny. Funny and sad at the same time.

It is. What would it take for a comeback to the real-life wrestling ring?

A crystal ball. [laughing] A crystal ball, I guess, would be my answer to that. To be able to see...that they weren't gonna ask me again. But, well, I could never go back to work for Vince. The circumstances could never be right. They could never work...to go back and work for Vince. Because ultimately, they have an ulterior motive. They always do. Every time they've brought anybody back, there's an ulterior motive.

Would you say you have regrets about working with past promoters?

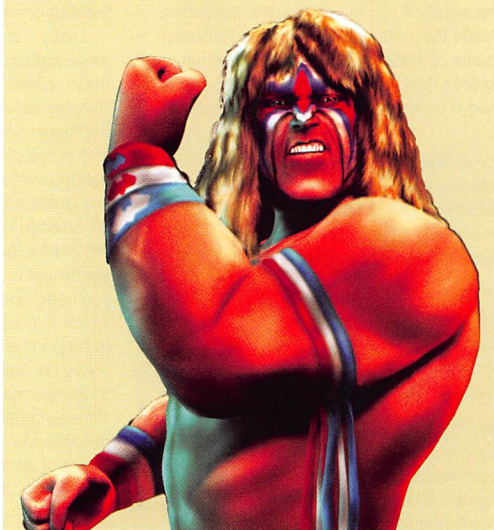
No. Nuh-uh. No. I mean, regret is such a waste of time. I mean, there's a lot of times I thought that I'd never agree to go back and work for Vince in '96, but I did. We live in a world of alternatives. You're gonna have good and bad and it's just gonna be that way and, so, I don't know. But you know this regret thing...how far back can you go? No, I don't.

Since the game is Legends of Wrestling, I was wondering if there's any legend that's inspired your career?

One guy that I always enjoyed was Don Muraco. He was a funny guy and a great guy and a great heel, man. He was a great heel. He used to drag the belt, and this was back in the time, you know you just didn't do that stuff. And he was beefy and he was thick and he talked like he ate gravel. You know, you couldn't even understand him, man. And he was funnier than hell. I just thought he matched his gimmick to a T. You know, Roddy Piper and those guys, Superfly, I mean, who can't watch the Madison Square Garden where he came off the top of the cage and just have goosebumps all over yourself? You're probably too young to have even seen that, but Superfly was something else.

Are there any closing comments you'd like to make?

Well, I just want to say I'm excited about being part of this the Legends game. The reason that I'm licensing the Ultimate Warrior character to it is because the legitimacy to their commitment to the legends and it's not just an aside. I mean, these guys are in the legends business because they're in it to stay.



Anime play

Bandai plays the anime game in Japan.
U.S. bound? Hope so.

As EA is synonymous with sports gaming in the U.S., the same can be said of Bandai when it comes to anime-based games in Japan. The most recent trio in their ongoing brigade all hinge on hugely popular shows and, fortunately, all have what it takes to make a splash stateside, riding on the heels of their respective franchises: *RAhXEPHON*, the stunning mecha series recently introduced by ADV Films, the now-legendary *Evangelion*, which recently culminated in one of anime's all-time movie events and is currently undergoing a director's cut, and the classic *Macross*, which shows no signs of aging in the wake of continued spin-offs and this...the pinnacle of all *Macross* video games.

I'm amazed there's not a huge stink being made about this one here in America. I presume Bandai will bring it out at E3 2004 and parade it as not only the first truly great *Macross* game, but easily their best game ever. If not, I wouldn't be surprised if Sega opted to hold onto it. Whether they do or not, if you're a fan, waiting to find out is not an option. Little to no Japanese is needed to enjoy what amounts to mission-based sorties interrupted by brief interludes that you can pretty much gauge by expression, especially if you're familiar with the series. Aside from Atari's multi-console *Robotech* game of 2002 (a good albeit somewhat sparse ride), Japan's answer to *Star Wars* has enjoyed a fledgling life on console at

best, rarely rising above mediocre—a detail that this game, developed by none other than AM2, quickly washes away, revealing perhaps the most impressive air- and ground-assault-based game on console today. This is a full-blown AM2 game riding on *Macross* framework...pretty much all you need to know.

RAhXEPHON is quite another story. This one, although surprisingly action/RPG-based, requires a measure of feeling around in figuring out how to progress into battle. The trick seems to lie in asking characters about other characters in a given room during the game's real-time segues by pressing left or right and following the color of each text box—green being open to dialogue, grey closed and red pointing towards an event. Pretty simple, although, given the amazing story and amount of dialogue, unless you're die-hard into *RAhXEPHON*, you're better off holding a vigil for a U.S. release on this one. The game's mech assaults are something of a *Gundam*/*ZOE* amalgam featuring multiple lock-ons in ranged and melee combat, but they're not worth the amount of guesswork and frustration involved in reaching them. There's nothing worse than a deep, compelling story you can't understand. Well, okay, Clay Aiken, but that doesn't count.

Lastly—and the game I'd most like to see arrive stateside—*Evangelion* for PS2 brings the prophetic anime to classic anime/RPG life with real-time elements layered with traditional anime-style dialogue along with a sort of real-time-strategy-meets-turn-based fighting system as Shinji and company go into battle against Angels in sync with the 26-episode series. Controlling Shinji, cruising around NERV headquarters and Katsuragi's apartment (where's a shower scene when you need one?) is great, and the battles, in which a measure of intelligence is required to properly set up Unit 01's locations around Tokyo 03, feature blistering representations of Shinji's many epic battles. *Evangelion* still hasn't had the impact in the States it deserves as one of the most significant works of animation ever produced. The more *Evangelion*, the better. **Dave Halverson**



Neon Genesis Evangelion



Neon Genesis Evangelion

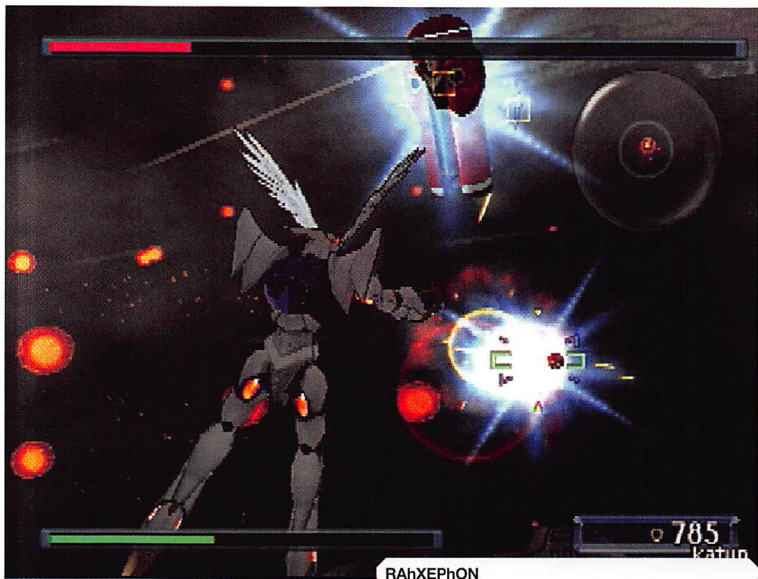
System: Playstation 2
Developer: Alfa System
Publisher: Bandai
Available: November 2003 (Japan)

Macross

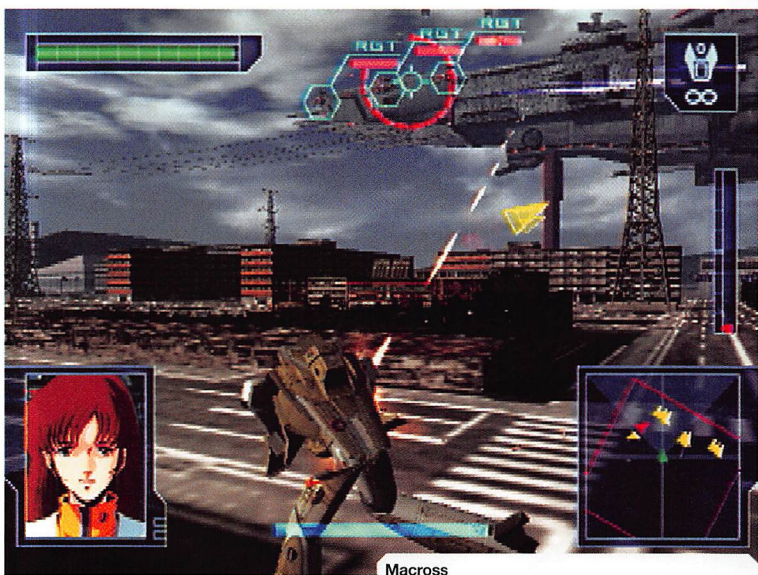
System: Playstation 2
Developer: AM2
Publisher: Bandai
Available: October 2003 (Japan)

RAhXEPHON

System: Playstation 2
Developer: Bandai
Publisher: Bandai
Available: September 2003 (Japan)



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Original Dirty Pair

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The latest case file from ADV's *Dirty Pair* vault is on the short side at 50 minutes and devoid of any extras beyond the usual previews, but nevertheless it's a quality old-school ride amidst a recent sea of squeaky-clean digital science-fiction. Starring the original queens of cleavage in their not-so-incompetent guise (compared to the more recent *Dirty Pair Flash*, which portrayed Yuri and Kei as a two-woman wrecking crew with nary a brain cell between them), things get underway when the 3WA's central computer spits out orders for the DP to investigate the explosion of a space liner (killing some 300 passengers) and the all but simultaneous abduction of a scientist and his family, figuring the two events are in some way connected. Fairly standard government cover-up type stuff along with the subsequent fallout ensues, including, but not limited to, explosions, murder, plot twists and, of course, plenty of lewd behavior on the part of Kei, the more, shall we say, tomboyish of the two. The cool thing about *ODP* is that it's presented with such old-school savoir-faire, you can't take your eyes off of it. The way Studio Nue retrofit modern conveniences into traditional life are especially fascinating now that such endeavors have become reality and therefore passé, and the character designs and animation are at their expressive best. Some classic anime seems to just get older, while others (present company included) only get better with age. **Dave Halverson B**

studio adv films
rating 15 & up
running time 50 minutes
available now



The Big O II

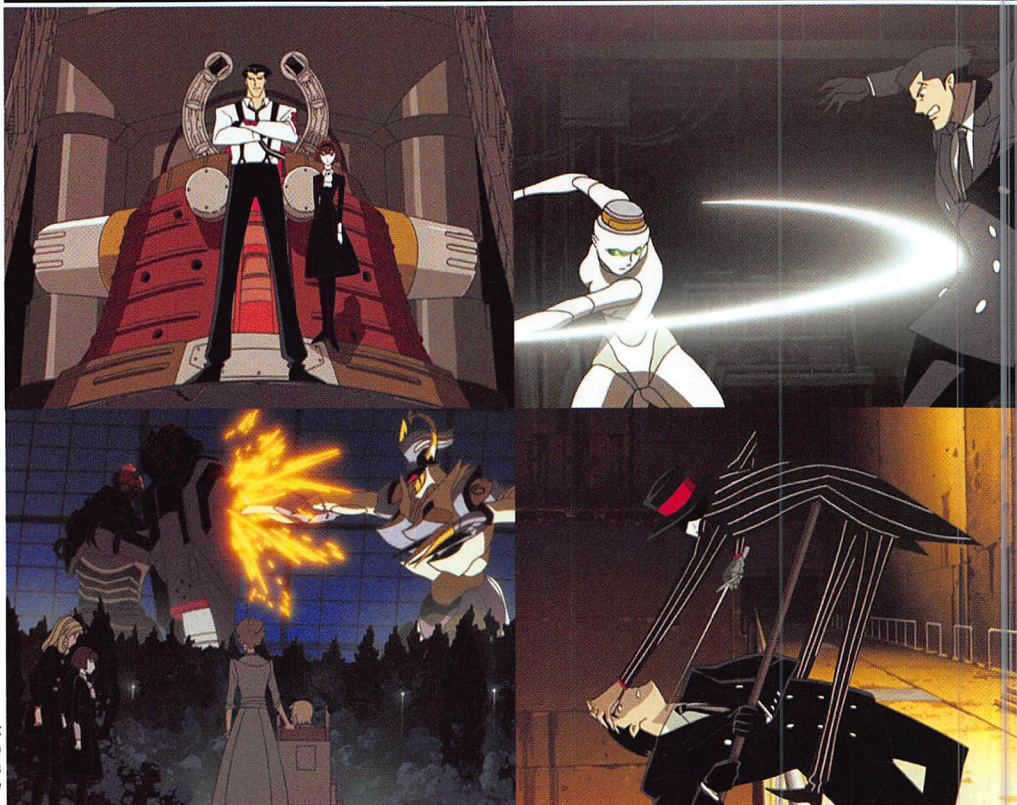
Bandai's mecha noir is back for another go

Last year was so brimming with goodness that, after its debut, *The Big O* eluded me. Well, that and the fact that anything headed for TV I usually write off as hackneyed, only edited. Halfway through *The Big O II* however, and there I was, digging through my anime stash like a deranged squirrel, searching for last year's screeners, which have since found their way onto my must-see stack.

Not knowing how the first season left off, the second certainly begins in high style with the protagonist (Batman de-jour Roger Smith) stumbling around Paradigm City, one big melting pot of androids and amnesia since losing its collective memory 40 years prior, looking for answers. The converted bank he called home is once again just a bank, the people he knew no longer recognize him, and he is troubled by the memory of a cataclysmic battle inside of *The Big O* that he can't place, his faithful android Dorothy Waynwright by his side. By the time the reflective first episode scratches its way back to normalcy—with Roger back in the saddle as City Negotiator, taking on cases in conventional episode form—we're not sure how we got there or even where we are, just that finding the answers is going to be compelling, to say the least.

Big O's Batman: The Animated Series-meets-Japanese-mecha look seems as honed as it's ever going to get, and the slick editing and moody noir soundtrack make it seem all the more lavish and above the norm. **Dave Halverson B+**

studio bandai entertainment
rating 13 & up
running time 100 minutes
available now



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Time Stranger

A nightmare before Christmas

One of the better psychosomatic stories in recent memory, most of *Time Stranger* takes place in heroine Remi Shimada's mind as she clings to life after a tragic accident.

Forty years prior, Remi piloted a giant robot and saved the world; now in her 70s (not looking a day over 25), she's been given just days to live and a one-percent chance of survival at that. As her associates assemble one by one at her bedside, doing their respective best to aid her in the real world with their substantial clout, the real battle for Remi's survival begins playing out in her mind where, trapped in a strange city they can't escape, those same associates by her side, Remi and company are each issued letters stating the news of their imminent deaths accompanied by actual photos of the event, and a set number of days until they will occur. Remi has drawn the short straw, given just two days to live before her "baptism of blood," which will see her mobbed and literally torn to shreds. Whether or not she can escape this fate seems to correlate with events in the material world, or so it would seem. Produced in 1985, what *Time Stranger* lacks in technique (if indeed you hail modern technique as an improvement), it more than makes up for in character, offering a state of melancholy and sophistication seldom seen in sci-fi anime. The DVD case, adorned with a demon clock (?) exclaims that it has "delightfully spunky attitude," but don't let that throw you; there's nothing cute or spunky about it. Where's that reversible cover when you really need one? **Dave Halverson B**

studio central park media
rating 13 & up
running time 90 minutes
available now



Nuku Nuku Dash

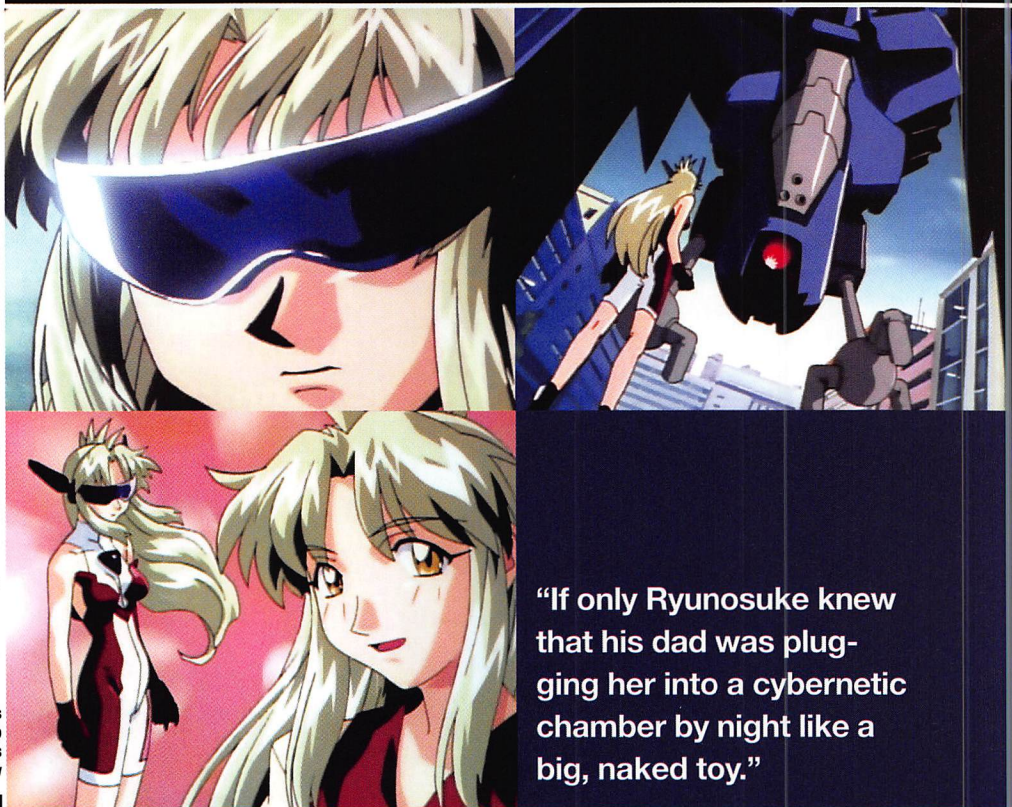
Nice kitty (no litter required)

They might as well call it Nuku Nuku Dash Saber Marionette Mahoromatic Kurumi, as it falls squarely into the pre-pubescent-boy-meets-foxy-android-come-killing-machine mold. The real question is whether a series cut from such familiar cloth can be original or endearing in any way. I mean, we've been down this road so many times, it's about to be closed for resurfacing. The answer in *Nuku Nuku's* case is, surprisingly, yes, due in no small part to an extremely smart setup and a robust cast of supporting players.

The story takes place in the city of Maneki, a metropolis like any other, except for the fact that it was designed by Mishima Industries (your friendly neighborhood manufacturers of weapons of mass destruction) as a testing ground for weapons R&D—weapons that just so happen to look like smoking hot female androids, for the most part. One such experimental model, one Nuku Nuku, ends up lost in the population, eventually taking up residence with a young boy, Ryunosuke, and his family, the mother of which happens to work for Mishima.

On the outside, Nuku Nuku appears to be the ultimate slightly older woman: great cook and housecleaner, sexy, sweet as can be. If only Ryunosuke knew that his dad was plugging her into a cybernetic chamber by night like a big, naked toy. As you can imagine, sexual innuendo follows as Ryunosuke falls deeper and deeper in love, but not to the extent that it overpowers the plot, as is so often the case whenever we're waiting for a shy boy to jump an android's bones (or endoskeleton or whatever). **Dave Halverson B**

studio adv films
rating 15 & up
running time 100 minutes
available now



"If only Ryunosuke knew that his dad was plugging her into a cybernetic chamber by night like a big, naked toy."

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Slayers Return

Double Ds and hocus pocus

The original girls of greed are back in action and looking none the worse for wear. We find the balloon-breasted Naga the Serpent and her flat-chested sidekick Lina Inverse (or is it the other way around?) exactly where we left them: eating and, of course, quarrelling. Think the restaurant survives? Amidst the rubble, they meet a weary young lass (apparently rocked by Lina's impromptu explosion) prompting them to get a room where they heal her wounds free of charge to avoid any residual guilt. Not being the charitable sorts, discovering she merely stumbled into the fallen bistro by chance while looking for heroes to thwart the recent invasion of her village, they quickly recoil and head for the door. Things take a sudden turn, however, once Lina gets wind of the village's name (meaning booty is afoot), and faster than you can say "demon hordes," she's popping lesser demons like piñatas from hell. From there, *Slayers Returns* does two things exceedingly well: lampooning both the time-honored super villain (Dr. Hell, eat your heart out) and the equally ripe-for-spoofing proverbial reawakened giant monster. As long as you come looking for nothing more than a good time, you'll go away pleased as punch, albeit spiked.

Slayers Returns isn't quite on par with *Slayers: The Motion Picture* (few OVAs are), but it definitely plays in the same illustrious league. Generously detailed and animated, skillfully produced and, of course, exceptionally well spoken, it's a rollicking 60 minutes at the very least, packed with cheekiness, big boobs and strange magic.

Dave Halverson

Studio: ADV Films

Rating: 15 & Up

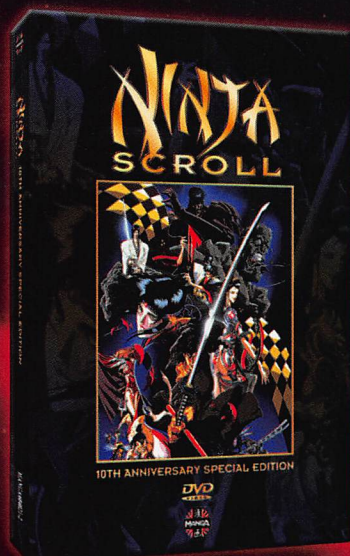
Running Time: 60 Minutes

Available: Now

"As long as you come looking for nothing more than a good time, you'll go away pleased as punch, albeit spiked."



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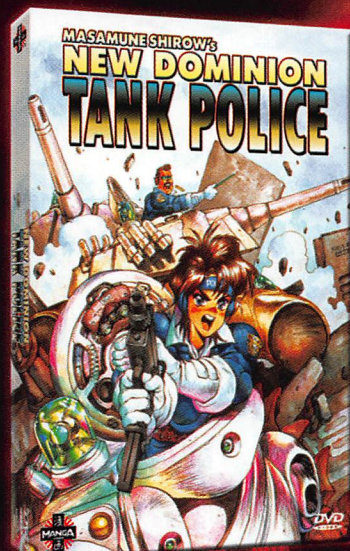
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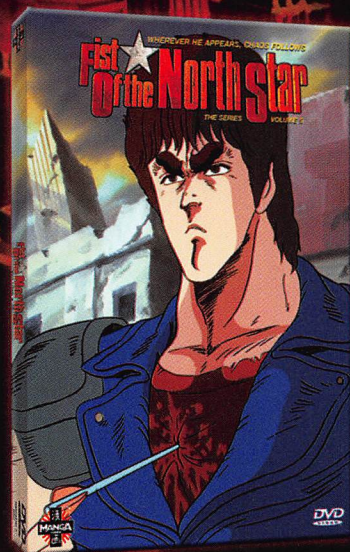
Japan's manga legend Masamune Shirow (*Appleseed*, *Black Magic M-66*, *Ghost in the Shell*) personally oversaw the production of this exciting series to ensure that the anime remained faithful to his original 1992 manga books. Shirow delivers a darkly comic vision of a future overrun with fast and furious mecha, cybernetically enhanced humans and rouge androids. Contains six half-hour episodes.



ORGUSS 02

**"A SUPERIOR GIANT ROBOT
SERIES"
- ANIME ENCYCLOPEDIA**

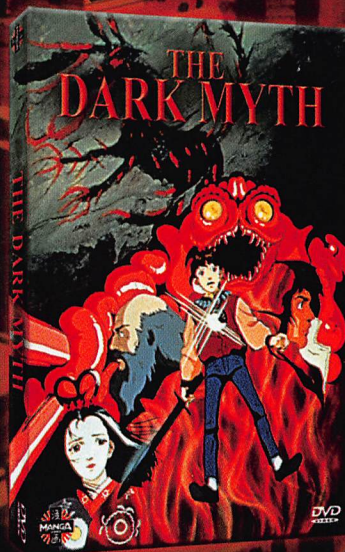
Based on the hit 35 episode Japanese television series *Orguss*, acclaimed anime director Fumihiko Takayama (*Patlabor 3* / *Mobile Suit Gundam*) brings the story into the future 200 years after the original. Now available for the first time on DVD, *Orguss 02* features six pulse-pounding 30 minute episodes featuring dramatic mecha combat, giant robots and political intrigue intertwined with explosive sci-fi action.



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Martian Successor Nadesico

Prince of Darkness

Protecting the universe from angry Martians



Is it just me, or has anyone else noticed a slight surge of anime-series-based movies lately? Popular series like *CC Sakura*, *Sakura Wars* and *Cowboy Bebop* now all have their own movies that pick up where the episodes leave off. Now, not to be left out, *Martian Successor Nadesico* makes its motion picture debut. However, with an anticlimactic story, an under-realized plot for the antagonist and unexplained changes in favorite characters, maybe they should have just left well enough alone.

Taking up the story two years later, the *Nadesico* movie begins in a time of peace between the Jovians and Earth. Everything would be close to perfect for little Ruri, who is now the captain of the *Nadesico B*, if two of her closest companions had not disappeared almost two years earlier. Both Captain Yurika and pilot/cook Akito are nowhere to be found and are considered dead by friends and family. When the *Nadesico* is sent out on a secret mission, Ruri decides to also find out what has really happened to her friends.

The premise of the *Nadesico* movie doesn't overtly sound deficient, but deep down, the story is empty. The plot ramps up nicely, then stumbles and ultimately falls into an unsatisfying heap. It makes you scratch your head and wonder what happened. Perhaps the worst offense of the *Nadesico* movie is the mostly unexplained, and greatly over-dramatic, personality change in Akito. In fact, the word "unexplained" accurately describes the entire movie. Expect the same magically delicious character and mecha designs from the series, as well as improved animation, but not much else. **Christina Alexander C**

Studio: ADV Films

Rating: 15 & Up

Running Time: 90 Minutes

Available: Now

"Expect the same magically delicious character and mecha designs...but not much else."



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WARNING! Pop culture is not safe. Anime, Hollywood movies, video games and all sorts of other targets have stumbled within the parody cross-hairs of this irreverent series. Relax, it's all in good fun.



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KIDDY GRADE

These tricks are not for kids

Advancess in transportation have allowed humankind to colonize space, giving rise to a Galactic Union along with the GOTT (Galactic Organization of Trade and Tariffs) to police the ever-expanding reaches of the human condition. Comprising teams of two, all of which are young and beautiful (and mostly female), each GOTT officer possesses a special power as well as an uncommonly close bond with their partner. Thanks to the GOTT's available technology and status, teenage girls are enhanced to a degree that they are nearly unstoppable, even as the technology around them, from gravity bombs to cyborg killing machines, continues to develop. Initially, it seems like no matter what the opposing forces throw at them, laying the cosmic smack down is nearly effortless.

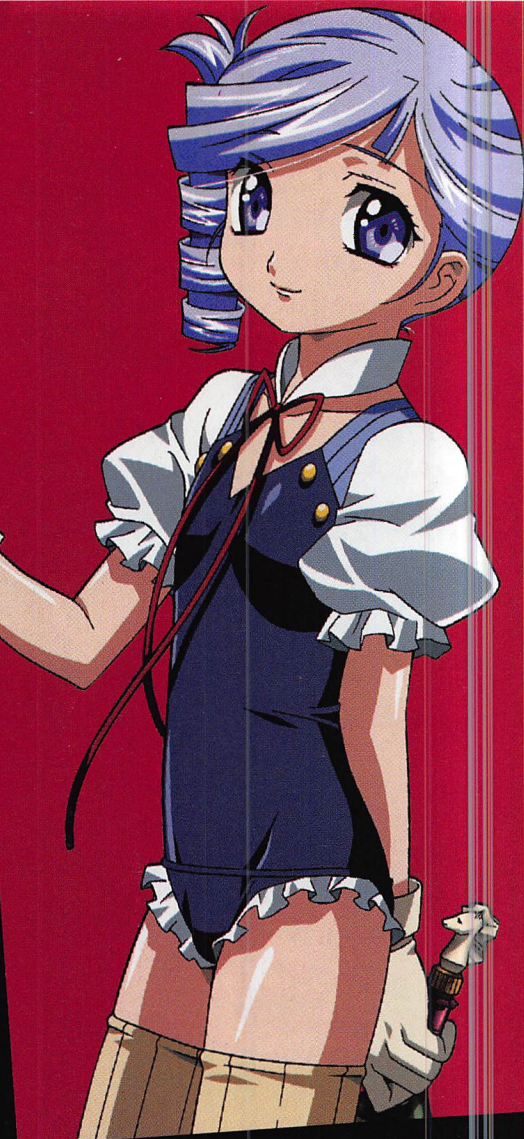
The first volume of *Kiddy Grade* deals mostly with the series' two leads: Éclair, a seriously "enhanced" 16-year-old soldier who does things with a tube of lipstick that demands your immediate attention, and Lumiere, a much younger (although eerily demure) girl with the ability to communicate with any computer or electronic device as well as guns and missile systems, rendering them non-operational using only the power of her mind. The two are chaperoned by Armburst, a smooth-talking 20-year-old officer of the Galactic Union who carries an indestructible case able to compress large matter into its hold...like the President. Following the three of them through the initial 90-minute gestation of *Kiddy Grade* is an almost illegally entertaining experience.

As great a year 2003 has been for series anime, *Kiddy Grade* looks to be a cut above, in league with the year's absolute best, which fares well for the anime year ahead. The fact that a 24-episode TV series can look this amazing is not only a testament to Gonzo but also a prime example of how new animation techniques continue to streamline the process of producing high-quality, detailed and shaded imagery in record time. With each passing work, Gonzo's raw talent in pretty much every facet of production seems to grow stronger. *Vandread*, *Hellsing*, *Full Metal Panic*, and now this; it's amazing the body of work they've managed to produce in just a few short years, given the quality of their product. At this rate, the anime invasion should deem choppy, farmed-out animation obsolete in a matter of a few more years.

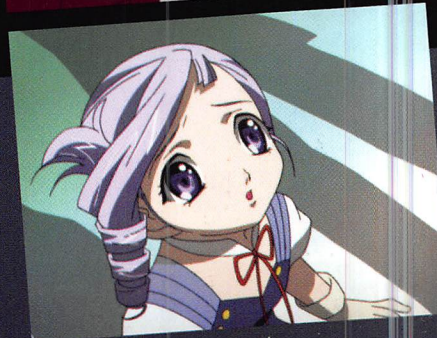
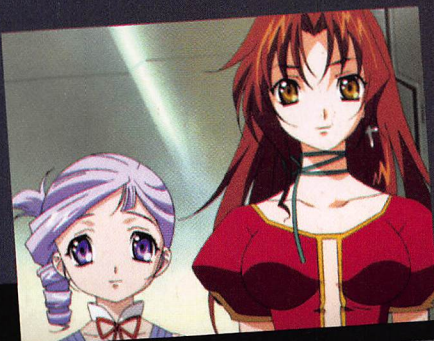
Like so many deep-space epics, *Kiddy Grade* follows the exploits of an organization meant to uphold interstellar law, only this time out there's more of everything to sink our teeth into right from the get-go, from interesting characters and villains to political systems to mecha to ships to new ways to kick butt. And it's all brought to life looking more like a theatrical release or big-budget OVA than a 24-episode series. It's like an *Outlaw Star* with 10 times the budget—really amazing stuff.

I can hardly wait to see where *Kiddy Grade* goes from here in terms of story depth and character development, given the number and variety of characters introduced in the first three shows. There are a few gratuitous moments in Volume One that came across a little creepy (naked 12-year-olds I can do without), but given the context, they seem meant to send a message of how mature the girls are mentally rather than attempting to tantalize the pedophiles of the world. Of course, they can show all of Éclair they want, and I can hardly wait to see Tweedledee and Tweedledum. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: FUNimation
Rating: 13 & Up
Running Time: 90 Minutes
Available: Now



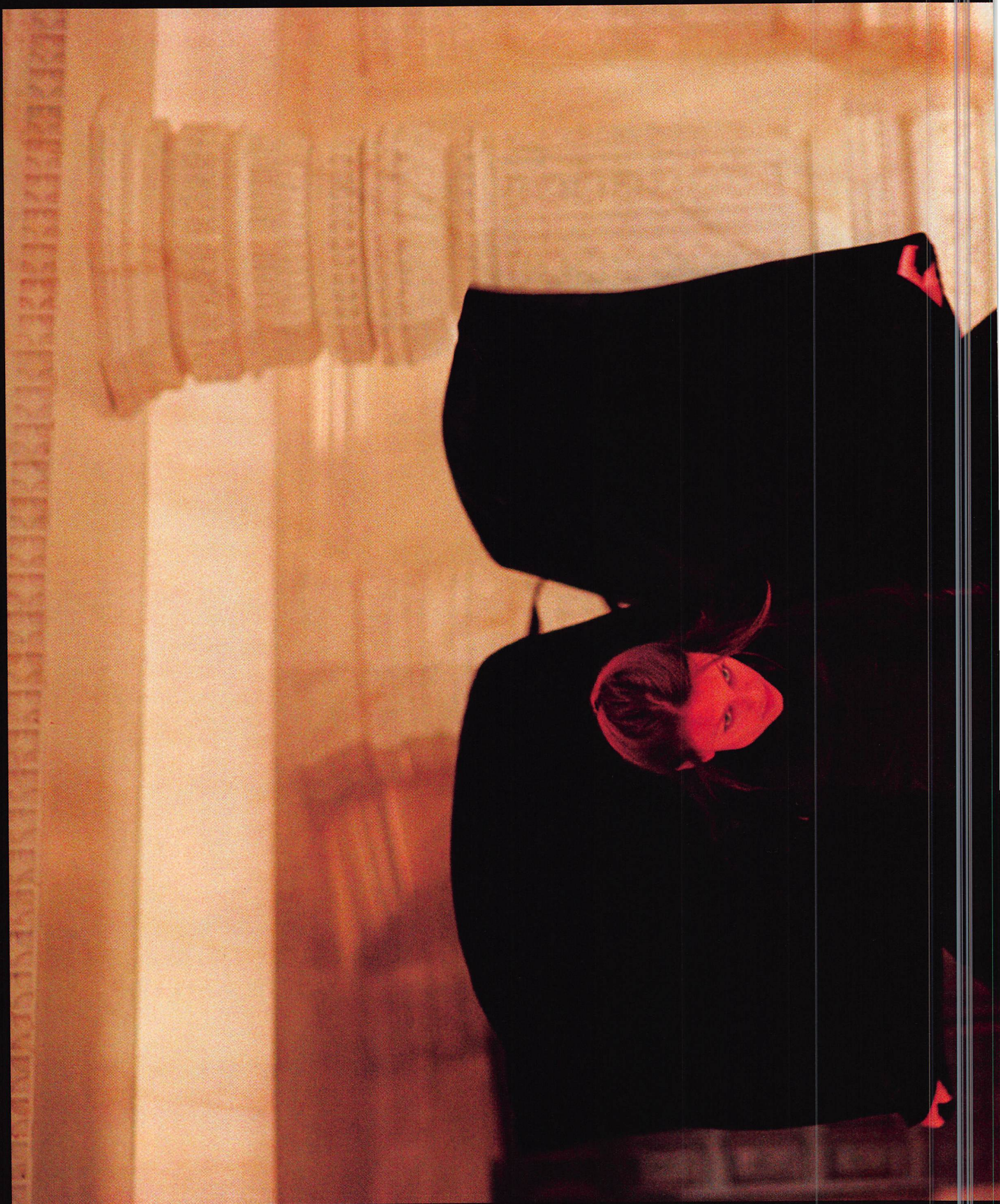
The GOTT's Éclair and Lumiere redefine girl power.





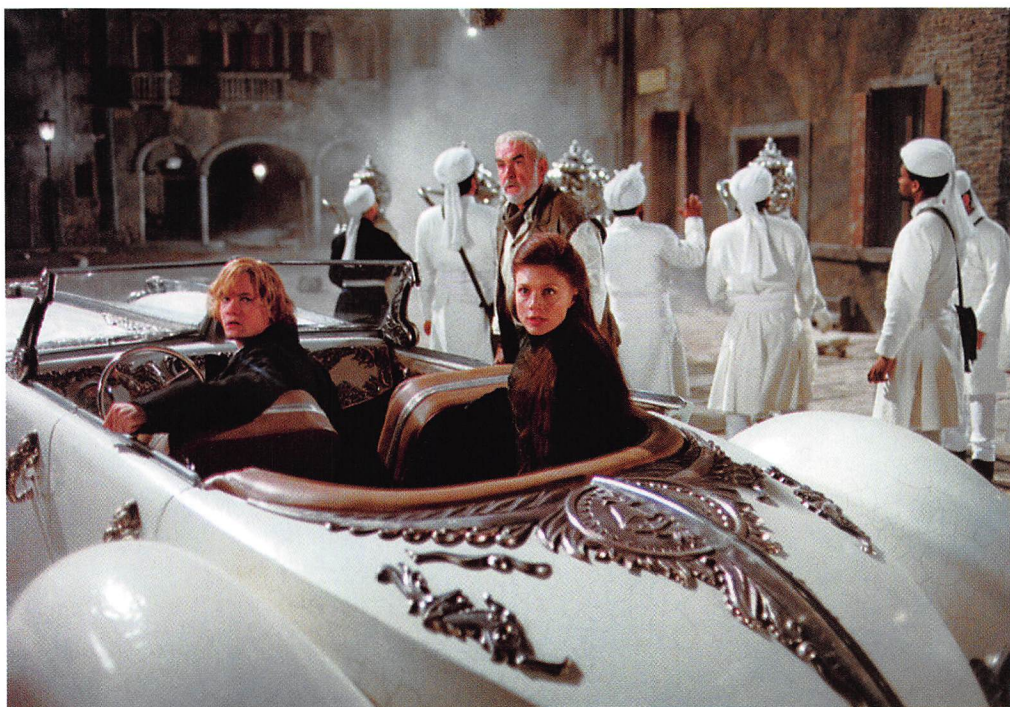
"With each passing work,
Gonzo's raw talent in pretty
much every facet of production
seems to grow stronger."







play MEDIA



The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen

Starring: Sean Connery, Naseeruddin Shah, Peta Wilson, Shane West
Director: Stephen Norrington
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG-13

You may or may not have stayed away from *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* due to the flogging it took in the vast majority of the press (my sign to rush out and see something immediately), but fear not the DVD. At the very least, you will be treated to pure movie magic: handmade creature effects over CG (you'll wish they took this road with *The Hulk* after seeing Hyde), superb miniature work and some magnificent sets. As pure comic farce, *League* delivers one of the most stunningly visual and entertaining rides in recent years; if only the continuity problems and story holes weren't so hideously unmasked. Following the invisible man's makeup

is the definition of faux pas; Allan Quartermain leaps from the fast-moving Nemomobile to a one-point landing; and Dorian Grey's suit seems to have healing powers, but these reveal a lack of footage going into editing and do little to derail the film's comic book underbelly. I'm thrilled movies like this can still get made, sans the kind of gratuitous hype that made *Hulk* such a letdown. It's a shame people can't view them for the pure guilty pleasure they are.

Extras: Breaking down each aspect of the production, comprehensive details about the set design (including the infamous flood story and how they built Venice on a sound stage four football fields big in Prague...in the rain) and more are revealed, along with a fascinating look at miniature work and the creation of Hyde, the costumes, the Nemomobile and the Nautilus. Twelve deleted scenes are offered (all wisely deleted) along with two full-length audio commentaries. An altogether extraordinary DVD that demands multiple viewings. **Dave Halverson**

Movie: B- **DVD:** B+

Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl

Starring: Johnny Depp, Geoffrey Rush, Keira Knightly, Orlando Bloom
Director: Gore Verbinski
Released By: Buena Vista Home Video
Rated: PG-13

Don't be scared: a big-budget summer movie pulled from a famous theme ride can offer spirited entertainment. This swashbuckling, high-energy adventure is filled with an effortless charm you just don't get in Hollywood anymore. Johnny Depp, let loose to ham it up in a performance that does wonders in lifting the film to higher ground, plays the frisky pirate Jack Sparrow, whose ship is stolen by his first officer, Barbossa. So off he goes to reclaim his cherished Black Pearl, running into battles over the high seas, armies of skeletons, dirty ol' pirates and the British navy. Of course, a love interest is involved in the madness, and a few supernatural touches are thrown in to ramp up the special effects budget. This movie is slick and loud, always a pleasure to soak in with its gorgeous cinematography and lavish sets. Somehow this massive production was kept heartfelt and fun in a time when crap drips down the summer screen. At well over two hours, the movie wears out its welcome, especially on DVD, and it's a bit disappointing that the writing team know for penning the smart *Shrek* doesn't provide more of a human element, but you can't help but give in to the spectacular sights while forgiving the empty moments.

Extras: Endless list, some of it filler: deleted scenes, bloopers, the ever-more-popular featurettes, photo diaries. This isn't the most insightful actor/director commentary, with lots of observations about how amazing and wonderful and fantastic everything is. Writer commentary is much more informative. If you like toying around on your PC, there are cool little extras like the storyboard viewer and effects studio. **Brady Flechter**

Movie: B- **DVD:** B+



Alien Quadrilogy

Starring: Sigourney Weaver
Director: Ridley Scott, James Cameron, David Fincher, Jean-Pierre Juenet
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: R

If you're a breathing male, this was all you wanted for Christmas. Quite possibly the greatest DVD compilation ever assembled, *Alien Quadrilogy* isn't merely a box set with a few additional bells and whistles attached—it's four alternate versions of four of the best science fiction films ever made, presented by the individual directors in the light they deemed best for the compilation. Ridley Scott's "alternate cut" of *Alien* (called a director's cut for marketing purposes) presents a streamlined and polished alternative version of Fox's proposed longer cut for the theatri-

cal re-release (originally turned down by Scott); James Cameron presents the best possible version of *Aliens* in the absence of time constraints (essentially the Special Edition cut); Fincher's controversial *Alien 3* is fully restored and remastered including an additional 30 minutes of never-before-seen sequences (including newly completed optical and digital effects); and with Jean-Pierre Juenet's *Alien Resurrection*, the gloves really come off. The special edition *Resurrection* boasts every available scene actually filmed from Joss Whedon's script, including a never-before-seen Earth-bound ending. On top of the new cuts and the original four films, each special edition includes comprehensive extras from both pre- and post-production, while a ninth disc features ultimate collector Bob Burns (lord of the props), a Dark Horse cover gallery and script to screen comparisons. **Dave Halverson**

Movie: A **DVD:** A

Cool World

Starring: Brad Pitt, Gabriel Byrne, Kim Basinger
Director: Ralph Bakshi
Released By: Paramount Home Video
Rated: PG-13

While *Cool World* really shows its age, it's still a fascinating look at Ralph Bakshi's ostentatious animation style and the kind of hand-made filmmaking that took place before rendering a single frame was comprehensible. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* did it better four years earlier (much better), but with nowhere near the edge Bakshi infused into *Cool World*, and sans a real beauty, the likes of Kim Basinger. While Noids Brad Pitt and Gabriel Byrne did their pioneering best, lumbering around flat facades trying to synch with characters to be added later, the illusion of them ever interacting with Doodles (toons) never really took hold, but it's an eye-popping journey nevertheless. What *Cool World* lacks in production values it makes up for in raw, unadulterated animated lunacy. When Bakshi isn't sexing it up, he's dropping safes and force-feeding sight gags faster than you can say "no sex with Doodles!" I don't know which looks more weathered—the film or the game—but both stand true as must-have throwbacks. It's a shame they couldn't have offered some insight into the film's creation on the DVD, ostensibly what the medium is for.

Extras: Are they mad?! They must have spent years putting this together! Set Up and Scene Selection! Who's got the time!? **Dave Halverson**

Movie: B **DVD:** na



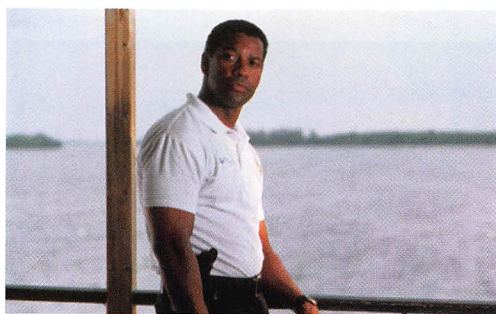
South Park: The Complete Third Season

Starring: Voices of Trey Parker, Matt Stone, Issac Hayes
Director: Various
Released By: Comedy Central/Paramount
Rated: TV-MA

Two words: Chinpoko Mon. If *South Park*'s spoof on Pokémon doesn't send your favorite refreshment shooting out your nostrils, chances are nothing will. Every season of *South Park* has been great for one reason or another, but Season 3—created simultaneously with the *South Park* movie, *Bigger, Longer & Uncut*—is where things really turned the corner. Chef quits and almost marries a succubus, we get hooked on Monkey Phonics, Korn gets all Scooby Doo, and millennium madness kicks into overdrive in episodes directly preceding and following the turn-of-the-century craziness that was supposed to turn the world on its ear. The best satire on television only gets better with age.

Extras: Unless you were really into Colorforms as a kid, SP doesn't really lend itself to DVD extras, although Matt and Trey's mini-commentaries for each episode are surprisingly (and refreshingly) actual commentary, rather than the usual facetious nonsense. **Dave Halverson**

Season: A- **DVD:** C



Jeepers Creepers 2

Starring: Ray Wise, Jonathan Breck as The Creeper
Director: Victor Salva
Released By: Buena Vista Home Video
Rated: R



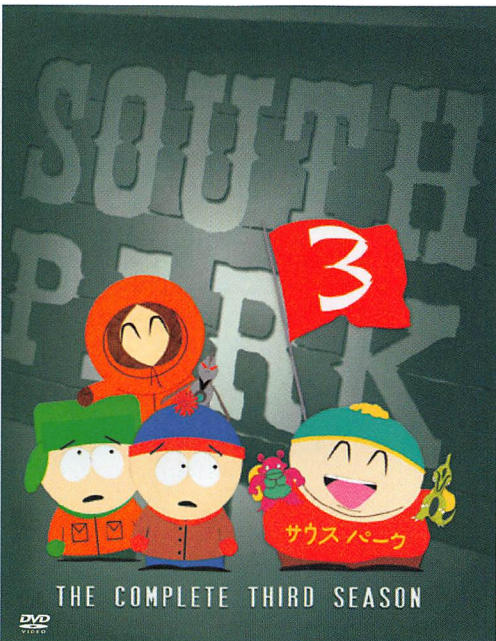
A high school football team is on their way home from the state championship when a creepy throwing star with a tooth in its center shreds their big, yellow bus' tire. What sort of vile, disgusting, bat-like creature wearing a leather hat and possessing a penchant to snort like a horse would do such a thing? Why, The Creeper, of course, and he's awakening

from a 23-year slumber to collect body parts he needs from select victims. Can the boys band together to put an end to this devil's feast for good before losing too many team members' heads and torsos and innards? That I kind of enjoyed this slaughterfest must be chalked up to a soft spot for decent horror, as long as it doesn't send me cringing too much. *Jeepers Creepers 2* will bore you if you hated the first, but I was open to its decently crafted suspense and the flying talents of the nasty lead slasher. All horror films should be shot in open farmland.

Extras: Lots of decent featurettes, like "Digital Effects by the Orphanage" and "Creeper Creation" featurette. Commentary better than expected by cast and director.

Brady Fiechter

Movie: C+ **DVD:** B-



Out of Time

Starring: Denzel Washington, Dean Cain, Sanaa Lathan, Eva Mendes
Director: Carl Franklin
Released By: MGM
Rated: PG-13

Funny how a movie can teeter on the edge of incredulity and still manage to ratchet up the tension. Such is the beauty of suspending our disbelief, but where the marginally entertaining thriller *Out of Time* ultimately fails is in its overworked absurdities. Talented director Carl Franklin takes us through too many twists and turns to expect our attention to stay fully locked down, leaving the lush Florida setting to provide a mood worth sticking around for. The movie stars Denzel Washington as Matt Lee Whitlock, a small-town sheriff who gets tangled in an affair that leads to...well, more than he bargained for. To reveal any details would kill the suspense the film strains so diligently to create in its contrived surprises.

Extras: Outtakes are always fun but are indeed nothing more than extras. Minor bits like screen tests and the usual director commentary round out the list. **Brady Fiechter**

Movie: C+ **DVD:** C

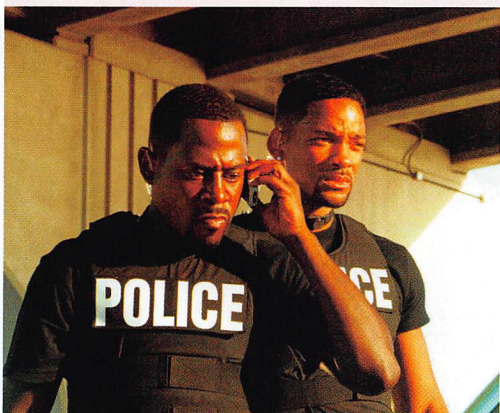
Bad Boys II

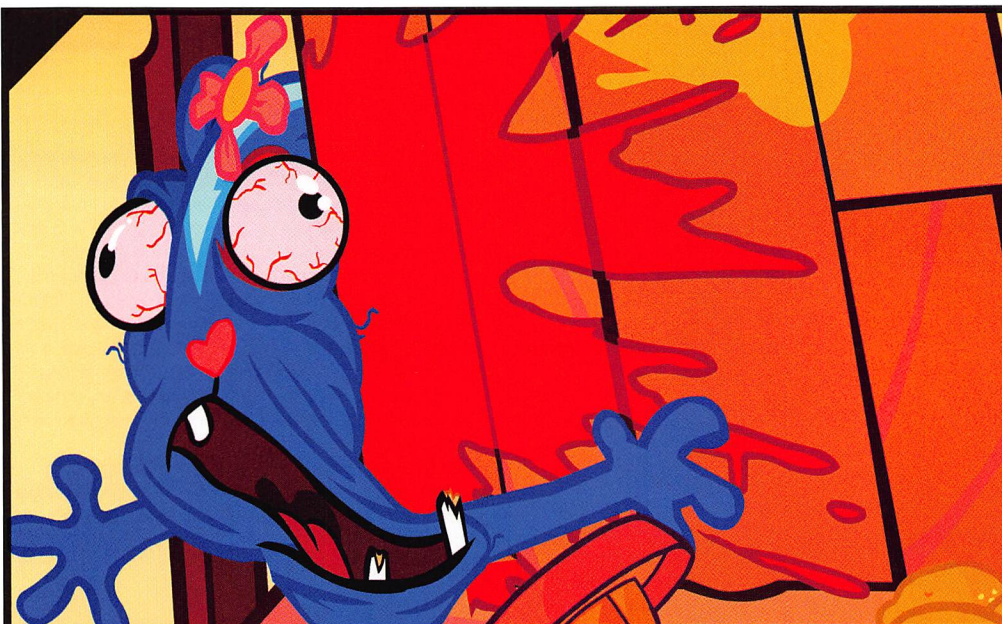
Starring: Will Smith, Martin Lawrence, Jordi Molla, Theresa Randle
Director: Michael Bay
Released By: Buena Vista Home Video
Rated: R

There are moments in *Bad Boys II* so shamelessly crass and crude that I felt hopeless for the art of moviemaking. There are moments in *Bad Boys II* so thrilling I wanted to shout the praises of the mindless action flick. There are moments in *Bad Boys II* when I laughed, moments when I wanted its bloated plot to just end already, moments when I wanted to go back and watch again. This sequel lacks *Bad Boys*' more subdued and clever banter between the charismatic talents of Martin Lawrence and Will Smith, who definitely work well off each other even when you just want them to shut the hell up, and what it loses in the looser fun of the original it tries to hide under the cover of endless noise. Every shot in this film is gratuitous flash, playing like a \$100-million dollar commercial shoot targeted for viewers who don't like to blink. It's all head-pounding fun for a while, but the cheap racial barbs and misogynistic sludge drag it all down before it can add up to what it ultimately is: a mindless, terrifically slick action-buddy flick.

Extras: Deleted scenes, Jay Z "La-La-La" video, production diaries and the ones that entertain: stunts and visual effects featurettes. **Brady Fiechter**

Movie: C **DVD:** C+





INTERVIEW

Kenn Navarro & Rhode Montijo, show creators

Appearing online and recently in hot spots like MTV and Ozzfest, the deliciously twisted *Happy Tree Friends* features animation shorts of cute little animals being mutilated—now available for your viewing pleasure in the latest DVD release, *Second Serving*.



play: Hopefully you can take this as the highest compliment, but you guys are messed up, huh?

Navarro: Awesome.

Montijo: Yes we are. Yes!

Navarro: How did you guess?

Montijo: Yes, thank you, next question [laughs].

So where do you guys look to for all this inspiration? Itchy and Scratchy must fit in there somewhere.

Navarro: Yeah, you know, Rhode and I grew up on a very healthy dose of cartoons. And we still watch a lot of cartoons.

Montijo: Old-school Looney Tunes...

Navarro: Yeah, old-school Looney Tunes. Itchy and Scratchy is obviously a big influence on the show. Ren and Stimpy, South Park to an extent. More recently SpongeBob.

Definitely *The Simpsons*.

When you were growing up and everyone was playing nice, did you fantasize about mutilating your teddy bears, stuffing them in the garbage disposal?

Montijo: Only on Tuesdays.

Navarro: Yeah, we were only allowed to do it on Tuesdays. It was up to our parole officer.

Is there anything you won't do? Do you ever put ideas down and say, "Ok, now we've gone too far?"

Montijo: Well, there are no guns in *Happy Tree Friends*. We draw the line there, that's just going too far!

Navarro: Just too gross.

Montijo: Yeah, that's just crazy... No, but guns are too easy, so we try to shy away from that.

Navarro: We like making it tough for ourselves.

You got a favorite character of the bunch here?

Navarro: I like the rabbit, just because I do its voice. Kind of biased, but, you know.

When do you guys decide to cut yourselves off? I was watching the Pot Barbeque, I think it was called, where the coals are falling on the guy. I was just waiting for it to go on and maybe see him completely ignite.

Navarro: That was based on a true story, and we try to stay true to actual events when we're doing these things.

Uh huh.

Montijo: [laughs] No, that one, the Smoochies are a bit shorter. It's kind of a different take than the episodes, where you just kind of get right to it. Those were originally based on the Tamagotchi, those little virtual pets. You'd used to be able to feed them, and if you didn't, they would die. So with the concepts, basically we just had each option equal their death.

Navarro: Whatever they did, we'd kill them.

So you kind of draw from something specific when you're making these?

Navarro: Yeah, we started them off with the now-classic *Happy Tree Friends* formula: they start really cute, and we try to have something go wrong with that really cute scenario. And we also try to get kind of universally themed—a merry-go-round, or your first bike ride, or something like that. Something that everyone's familiar with, and try to get something twisted out of that, have something go wrong with it.

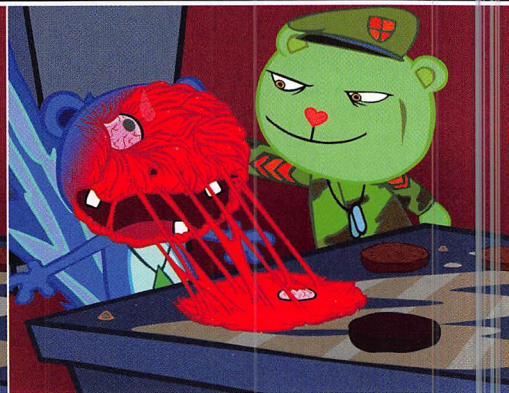
This may sound strange, but the more I watched the episodes, the more I started to get something out of them [laughter]. Yeah, I know... I started to laugh at them more, they kind of got personal.

Montijo: Well, you need help, because these weren't meant to be funny, they are personal.

Navarro: We were just always crying.

So how did it all get started?

"...we always wondered what would happen to those cute cartoons that we grew up watching...what if they had a little accident?"





Montijo: Kenn and I joke a lot that there just isn't enough violence on television, and...

Navarro: We had to fill that void. It was our calling. A burning bush spoke to us in the middle of the night and said we had to do it.

I doubt that burning bush was God.

Navarro: [laughs] I doubt it too. But seriously, how did it start? The violence was never the initial concept, like, let's go and make a really violent cartoon thing. Here at Mondo we do service work...animation requirements and stuff like that for other companies, and we had a client come in who wanted this really violent cartoon as part of their commercial. So we brainstormed a lot of ideas and we found out we were cracking ourselves up putting these little guys in these scenarios. All these ideas kind of sprung forth from that. So we did the thing and kept the idea in the back of our minds, thinking, this would really make a great show someday. It seemed like an endless pool to dip into. They ended up never using the piece, and when we got the chance here at Mondo to do our own show, we pitched the idea.

Montijo: They looked at us funny.

Navarro: Yeah, they did, actually [laughs]. It was hard at first; they couldn't grasp the concept. It was like, "So these guys die every episode and they come back? I'm not really sure how this show works."

Montijo: They also had a problem with the characters not having a recognizable language. Kenn and I partly did that out of laziness.

Navarro: We totally did it out of laziness.

Montijo: We saw other shows that struggle with writing dialogue and we wanted a really visual show, a short-attention-span show. And it ended up working in our favor, where people are viewing us in Germany, Japan.

I like the cute little squeaks; it just makes it right to watch them get mutilated. Maybe it would be a little too wrong if they were talking.

Montijo: [laughs] That's right, it'd be too conscious.

Which reminds me, I have to ask you... Is it Petunia, that's the character's name?

Navarro: The skunk?

Yes! I love one of the extras, where she's batting her eyelashes all disgustingly cute-like, and she stares lovingly at a pinwheel. The wind comes and just mows her face down.

Navarro: Oh yeah, that is a good one [laughs].

Montijo: That's a touchy subject for Kenn, something that happened to him as a child.

You know it's funny that... [laughter]. Obviously I like this way too much.

Navarro: We do too, so we share something in common.

So when you were pitching, you said people kind of looked at you strangely. You must get that a lot.

Montijo: Well, most the time we get a lot of feedback,

Petunia teaches Candy how to make lemonade the hard way.

sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad. Like hate mail. But we kind of live for that stuff.

So have any of your friends disowned you now that they see who you really are?

Montijo: Some have tried to kill us...

Navarro: Some have tried to run us over.

Well that's cool, they're just trying to reenact your skits.

Navarro: Rhode's actually just snubbed his nose when it's happening. It's not his real name, he had to change his name and move out here.

Where do you go from here?

Montijo: We're hoping to fill the spot after Winnie the Pooh.

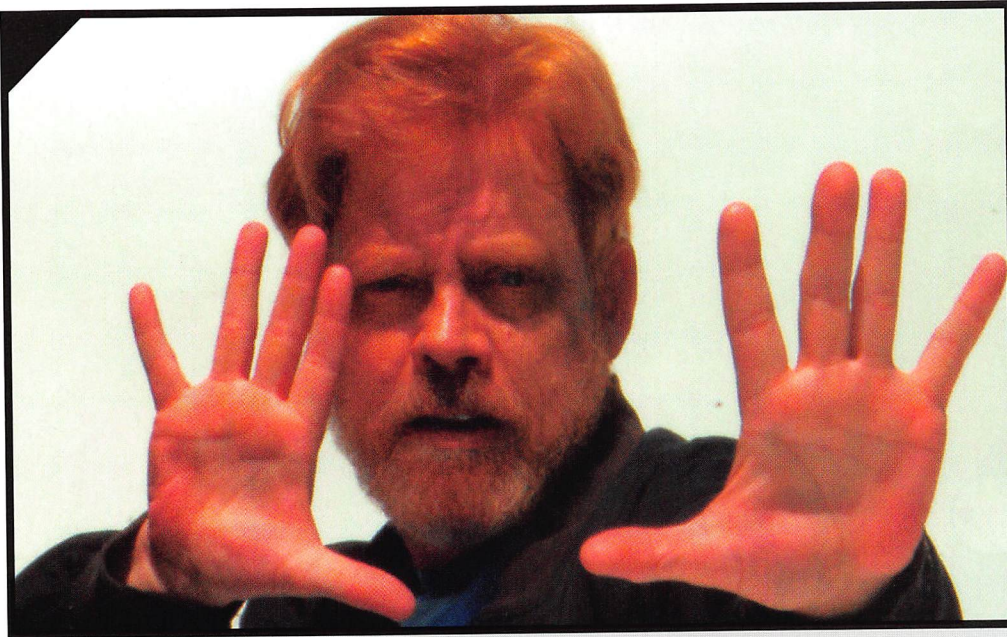
That sounds like the same audience. The kids will certainly enjoy this.

Navarro: [laughs] They've got to learn it from somewhere.

We're inspiring the youth of America. But come on, you know how we were as kids, we could handle it.

Montijo: That's right! Most the stuff we do, we always wondered what would happen to those cute cartoons that we grew up watching...what if they had a little accident?

Brady Flechter



INTERVIEW

Mark Hamill

Coming off his directorial debut on *Comic Book: The Movie*, Mark Hamill talks comics and movies

play: So, your first time directing. More challenging than you could have imagined?

Mark Hamill: Yes and no. I anticipated doing it for so long. It was sort of like, what took me so long? I love the added responsibility. Because I'm very opinionated, and as you get older and more opinionated you want to be able to step up to the plate and call the shots. And I'm a very collaborative person by nature anyway. I want your ideas. I'll be more than willing to take credit for them if they're good. I have such a talented and highly charged bunch; it was pretty much directing traffic. Coming up with characters that were meant to represent icons like Superman or Wonder Woman, that was fun, because I love the Golden Age, I love the World War II period of comic-book history. It took on a life of its own, really. I think there's a lot more to be explored in this area. I'm really happy with the way *Comic Book: The Movie* came out.

You know, I was at the Playboy party you had for the film, and seeing all those actors you had in the film hamming it up...it must have been so crazy, so much fun working around all that.

Oh yeah! In fact, they helped me to shape my character. Because originally I was sort of an erotic filmmaker. But I realized two things: number one, that it would be more of a satire or a comment on Hollywood and filmmaking than it would be a genuine look at the hobby of collecting comic books. Of all the people involved, only Tom Kenny is a genuine comic-book nerd. In fact, that's why I cast him at the last minute. I said, "Oh my God, I don't have anyone to talk to. I know everything about comics—my character Don Swan does. But everybody else is a civilian. Nobody else in the movie...I need my Robin, I need my sidekick." And he is just, I think, superb.

You've obviously brought your love for comics to this movie—maybe one of the biggest reasons you

wanted to do this? Don't you think it's so important to have a director like yourself, someone with an avid understanding of comics, making a movie like this? Sometimes I think a director is more bent on making a typical movie than a shout-out to true comic fans.

Oh, I agree. I mean, it's changed a bit with Sam Raimi directing *Spider-Man*. But generally, having a knowledge of the source material was not a prerequisite for getting the job as the director. And the screenwriter as well. To adapt a comic book, they'd read a best-of volume over the weekend. Remember that first *Wonder Woman*? They said, "Oh my God, it's so anachronistic, what are we going to do? We're gonna change the costume, the invisible plane is just too expensive, it's just too corny." Next thing you know you have this female, secret-agent-type *Girl From Uncle* show; there's only a passing resemblance to the source material. It's definitely difficult. I can understand why there are difficulties sometimes. Things that we accept on the printed page can be impossible to realize on the screen. But in our case, it was more a movie about people than it was about any one specific kind of obsession. In this case, comic books. And one of the things that made me feel good was that when we did focus groups, people who had no interest in comic books whatsoever loved the movie, because it doesn't matter: they could be war buffs or Barbie collectors or whatever, it's about people going on a fun trip, going to a big convention. And when you get that many colorful people together, it's bound to be fascinating.

And that's the thing. Even if you don't know that much

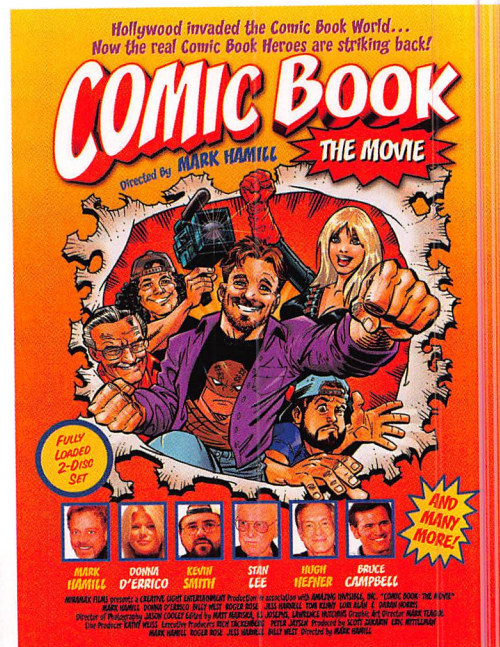
Check out www.comicbookthemovie.com for a look at the cool art designed for the film.

about comic books, they offer so much as an art form, there's so much influence. I'm not the biggest comic fan on the planet, but when I step into a comic-book store, I don't want to leave.

It's part of our history, part of the fabric of our society, especially reflecting the lower class, who couldn't afford... As you know, comic books started out as newspaper comic strips. Just the way television reflects our society now, newspaper strips especially reflected the economic times and certainly the patriotic fervor that we had during World War II. It was really something that affected comic-book history. We were selling millions and millions of copies of certain titles, because a lot of them were going overseas to the service men. It's just a really interesting time for me to be able to put something so highly personal on the screen and have people I have worked with, who are meaningful to me in my career, both in front of the camera and behind the camera. This was a labor of love I sort of went out with hat in hand: here's my budget, what can you do for me? And it came through beautifully...

It seems like you really paid careful attention to the details that will really excite the true comic-book enthusiast. Would you say this movie was made more for those who really love the world of comics?

Listen, this thing is as authentic as hell. If you really know the hobby, you'll see in Donald a total, committed fan. But I think what I tried to do, what you always do...what would I like to see? What do I find interesting? And like I say, the change from him being a Hollywood filmmaker to a comic-book fan and, incidentally, a high-school history teacher from Wisconsin was really an epiphany. It really fundamentally changed the dynamics of what we were doing. And so you have more than one outsider. It's really about how Hollywood devours source material and people. And into the world of Hollywood comes not only Donald Swan, but through his research he discovers a living heir previously unknown to exist, the creator of *Commander Courage*. He's thrilled, of course, he's delighted, and he thinks the Hollywood people will be delighted as well. They see a potential lawsuit, because here's somebody who might have a claim to some type of compensation for the character. I just love having these two worlds collide, 'cause I love them both. I think it was very important for me to go to Wisconsin and live there





Members of the cast ham it up: (from left)
Roger Rose, Lori Alan, Mark Hamill, Billy West,
Jess Harnell

for that summer. I was doing a movie called *Reeseville*, which was an independent film. I needed to get out of New York and Southern California, where people eat, drink and sleep show business. It was a real eye-opener.

An eye opener and surely refreshingly inspirational.

Very much so. These people are just great, genuine, wonderful people—not that they aren't in New York and California, but you just get your priorities screwed up. You're reading the grosses every Monday, and it's Emmy season and Oscar season and this and that. It's inevitable; it's just the way things are. You forget that real life goes on.

Yeah, it's overwhelming sometimes. I just got back myself from a break from the city, and it just felt so good to recharge and get away from it all, get away from all the billboards and oppression.

And of course one of the great advantages of doing Broadway is that you don't have a car.

Exactly.

That's all I did in Los Angeles when I was doing voiceovers was drive.

Drive everywhere and sit.

I go insane listening to that political yapping on the radio. I had to start bringing CDs of old radio shows, Rolling Stones, anything but being trapped in those cars. It's just terrible. I love the work, I just hate getting there.

A love hate relationship, such is life.

Exactly.

This passion, this love for comics and movies, must extend back to your childhood.

Absolutely. The truth of the matter is, I remember comic strips being in the newspapers and thinking, "Wow, these come to my house every day!" And there were strips that didn't have writing or words, like "Henry" and "The Little King." Or simplistic ones, like "Nancy and Sluggo." Really, Donald Swan is my alter ego, the sort of person who is in touch with their fantasy life to the point where they can just divorce themselves from reality and go into their little dream world. And I love Don Swan. People ask, "Are you him?" Certainly there are amplified aspects of my personality, I mean there's overlaps—certainly I'm not exactly that way. When I finished this, I thought, "If I can do anything, if I was to follow this up, what would it be?" And I thought, Donald could look at other aspects of pop culture. Because he's very sincere, and he desperately wants to do the right thing. But when he gets things sort of wrong, he's achingly genuine. He's too genuine for his own good.

I had this fantasy that I did a whole series of documentaries for HBO. Maybe not feature length, just an hour long or so. And get a reputation as a sort of Ken Burns for C- students. You know, he takes a look at various aspects of pop culture and he gets things genuinely in the right place and the right time, but there's just something off about his analyses. I think it would be a lot of fun. I do love this form, I really love the idea where the actors are involved to a point where they are improvising dialogue to a certain extent and you don't know exactly how it's going on. It's almost unheard of in television and movies. That's partially what gives it such a unique personality.

I remember reading somewhere that you said this film was very experimental, even beyond what Guest likes to do. Pretty much everything you did with *Comic Book: The Movie* was improvisational, right?

Well, obviously we brainstormed and got a general storyline, but we didn't even go as far as Eugene Levy and Christopher Guest do. Which they basically write a script, without



Having way too much fun at Comic-con.

"...I love the Golden Age, I love the World War II period of comic-book history."

dialogue. Every dramatic beat is clearly delineated, act 1, act 2. I would say ours was more along the lines of a kind of college experimental version of what they do. If we had, say, six months of preproduction, we probably would have done something approaching how they did with *Spinal Tap* and *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show*. Something like *Take the Money and Run*, which was the first fake documentary I ever saw, was scripted, and brilliantly so by Woody Allen. This one was more...almost like a reality show. We did use the public; we didn't know what we were going to get down [at Comic-con] in San Diego. And with people being so educated to reality television these days...it should be expected when you point a camera at a human being, they're going to behave differently than if they weren't on camera. So it was a mixture of those two elements. But there's a lot of reality here, a back story you don't really know about... When I switched from being a critical filmmaker and it would be about Hollywood and show business, an ambitious filmmaker who doesn't want to make documentaries, he wants to be making A-list movies...to me, that's been done, and it's tiresome and sort of icky. It's just not appealing. It was only when I really got to the basic idea of him being the representative of everything I love about this hobby, and unapologetic about being, "Yeah, I'm a nerd, but so what, that's your word for it. If that's what I am, I'm a good one, and an enthusiastic one."

Sounds like you'll be passionate for comics till the day you die.

Yeah, I can't help it. I do stress that I have so many other interests, so it's not like something that's 24/7. And you know, unless you read the reprints, it's pretty expensive for the average American to be able to avail themselves of all these Golden Age books. I've seen the hobby go from sort of a yard sale, a backyard swap-meet mentality, to appointment-only gallery sales, where you look at these books behind glass and with velvet gloves. It's been part of a big change in the last few decades.

Wherever it goes from here, let's just hope it continues strong.

Oh, I'm sure it will. I mean, right now it's all the rage in movies, it always reinvents itself. I guess the scariest time was in the '50s when it very easily could have died out. Something that's so vital, that represents such as autonomy for the artist to be able to draw and write and put it directly out without too much interference is something I think is too vital an art form to become completely obsolete. Even if the Wertham Committee was successful in completely decimating the comic-book industry, it would have resurfaced. I think the underground movement would have still happened. I think the most exciting chapters are still to be written. **Brady Fletcher**

DJ Gamers The Crystal Method

For fans of the DJ set, the names Scott Kirkland and Ken Jordan will be familiar ones. But for gamers, the duo is better known as The Crystal Method (aka TCM), pioneers in electronic music and mainstay contributors in the arena of game soundtracks. Known the world over for their albums *Vegas*, *Community Service* and *Tweekend*, the impending release of *Temple of Boom* will continue to put them on the musical map and placate eager fans hungry for new music. From their early work on the entire soundtrack for the game *Nitrous Oxide* (N2O) to their current contributions on EA's recent *Need for Speed Underground*, TCM have been longtime contributors and even bigger fans of the gaming world. Play got a chance to sit down with the dynamic duo to chat about long bus rides, intense game playing and the new music they are dropping.

One wonders what happens when DJs and producers like Scott and Ken get to mix it up in the studio with musicians of a different flavor, namely former Limp Bizkit guitarist Wes Borland and Roots beatboxer/rapper Rahzel. The two artists contributed tracks on The Crystal Method's new album, *Temple of Boom*, adding to the star-studded firepower the duo has attracted through their premier skills as producers, musicians and DJs. "We hooked up with Wes on the Family Values Tour a few years back when he was still with Limp Bizkit and we shared a lot of ideas with him and he was excited to work with us sometime in the future. Now seemed like the right time while he had some downtime and was in between projects and he was very professional and one of the bigger tech heads out there," offered Scott.

It seems a natural fit that The Crystal Method be involved in the music side of games, notably on *Need for Speed Underground*. "We have always been big into gaming, especially when we are traveling long distances on the road when we are touring," says Ken, laughing. "When EA wanted to license *Born Too Slow* off our new album, we were excited, since we are big Madden fans—some of the games get pretty out of hand!" exclaims Scott. "I would also add FIFA Soccer and some of the Star Wars games to our list of consistent favorites to pass the time on the bus," offers Ken. The guys from The Crystal Method are in good company on *Need for Speed Underground*, with legends like Rob Zombie and Rancid joining them to help comprise the soundtrack for the hot street-racing game.

The duo was recently in the Bay Area to meet with people from Apple, who are hoping that The Crystal Method will test and support new software called Soundtrack, which is similar to the program Acid—but for the Mac. "It is essentially a loop-based software that will be bundled with their Final Cut Pro, expanding the capabilities and offering some exciting tools for people to use in production and composition," states Scott. "When we walked into Apple, we were like kids in a candy store, what with our love of technology and the exciting innovations Apple is doing in the music space," confesses Ken.

When asked who they might like to work with or remix



Scott Kirkland and Ken Jordan — The Crystal Method

"We have always been big into gaming, especially when we are traveling long distances on the road..."

given their increasingly in-demand status, Scott and Ken had differing opinions. "We have been pretty focused on getting the remixes for our tracks and are excited that Eric Morillo, EK and Nubreed have committed to give us their interpretations of our first tracks," states Scott. "In the past, we have worked with everyone from Garbage, Rage Against the Machine, Linkin Park and P.O.D., which were all great opportunities to fuse electronic music and rock."

"I would love to work with Stevie Wonder and his old band, with old instrumentation—much like on *Superstitious*," enthuses Ken. Moving forward a few years in the musical spectrum, Scott states that Method Man, PJ Harvey, DJ Shadow and Fannypack would top his list of current artists he would consider cool to work with.

While the staple of The Crystal Method has always been their energetic live performances and their original composition CDs, their mix CD from last year, *Community Service* (coinciding with the tour of the same name), garnered critical acclaim in the electronic music world. "The mix CD was great fun to do," enthused Ken. "It was a chance to give back to the fans and was much less time-consuming than an album—which for us has been taking years! It is also an opportunity to expose people to some new and hopefully never-been-heard-before tracks and mixes."

While they seem to move easily from one project to the next, leaving little time for much else than music and spending time with their families, there are still a few areas yet to be tackled by The Crystal Method. "I would love to score a film," ponders Ken. "There are so many musical directions I would like to explore, but there is only so much that you can fit on a given album. With a film, you get to explore many different styles and moods of music." With this statement, don't be surprised if the next film you see has Ken's and Scott's names in lights at the end of the movie credits—it's a safe bet that they will get their wishes when they set their minds to a project. **Lucas Mast**

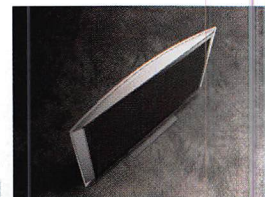
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Brave Soul

Find Brave Soul and dozens of English-translated hentai dating-sim games for PCs at jastusa.com. Also available at www.jlist.com

For adults aged 18 and older. © 2004 Peach Princess. Dealer inquiries welcome.



Slim rear projection LCD

Sony KDF-70XBR950

www.sony.com

Price: \$7,000

Talk about excess—this TV takes the cake, hands down. Not only is the KDF-70XBR950 the largest rear-projection LCD that Sony makes, it's the first XBR that incorporates the new WEGA Engine system with projectory LCD Optical Engines. When used with the 0.87-inch wide XGA LCD panels, you'll get 3.28 million dot resolutions. The increase in resolution also made a significant improvement in the contrast ratio. What does all this mean to you? Well, I'll put it this way: when I watched *Gladiator* on it, I almost wept. What's hard to believe about the KDF-70XBR950 is how slim and light it is. Even though the lens system contains over 11 elements, the form factor is almost like a plasma monitor. Other features include a built-in ATSC tuner, enhanced Memory Stick media playback, iLink and DVI-HDTV digital interfaces. **Tom Ham**

Portable mixer

Hercules DJ Console

www.hercules.com

Price: \$249

With digital music becoming the preferred medium over vinyl these days, DJs (whether pro or wannabe) have to find alternative methods to mix their music. Virtual DJ programs certainly work, but for anyone who has spun the "wheels of steel" for real, it's just not the same. Enter the Hercules DJ Console, a portable mixer that allows you to spin and scratch with relative ease. All you need is a PC (or laptop) and some speakers and you're ready to rock. The two jog wheels are outfitted with grips for rapid song searching and speed adjustments. The unit also has two built-in rotary encoders that will change the speed of the music and add effects in real time. There are even settings to create loops and pitch blending. With the included DJ software, users can mix any digital music format—MP3, WMA, General MIDI, ASIO 2.0 and CDs—just like with real decks. So whether you're a club jock or aspiring to be one, the Hercules DJ Console is a cool, cheap way to get into it. **Tom Ham**



Fancy cell phone

Siemens SL56

www.siemens.com

Price: \$39.99

Every once in awhile, a cell phone will come out that will make you say, "Holy crap!" A phone that when you lay it on the bar or at a restaurant, someone is going to notice it and, more importantly, notice you using it. Introducing the Siemens SL56. Measuring just 3.2 inches by 1.7 inches, the SL56 packs a wealth of options in one slick little package. With a 4,096-color screen, users can utilize features such as color picture messaging and visual Caller ID. There is also an optional clip-on mobile camera with a built-in flash so you can take pictures on the go. In addition, the SL56 has two-way SMS and EMS, polyphonic ring tones, voice-activating dialing and a speakerphone. What's hot is that the SL56 is SyncML compliant. This means you can wirelessly sync your PC or Palm-based contacts wirelessly via IR. Be prepared to turn some heads with this one.

Tom Ham

Available for AT&T and Cingular



Cooling controllers

Nyko Air Flo EX

www.nyko.com

Price: \$29.99 (PS2), \$34.99 (Xbox)

Gaming sessions can be intense business, causing your hands to sweat as the action turns chaotic. Here's your solution to the slippery situation: the Nyko Air Flo EX controller for Xbox and PlayStation 2. Like the original Nyko Air Flo, the new Air Flo EX provides you a consistent flow of fresh air through the controller grips, but has been redesigned with several new features, including increased airflow and redesigned hand grips for improved comfort and control. In addition to the basic cooling airflow, the controller offers two air speeds for customized ventilation, improved eight-way D-pad response, a built-in variable vibration function, pressure-sensitive analog buttons, along with many other features. No need to worry about batteries, either, since the controller is powered by the gaming system.



PS2 typing controller

Nyko iType2 Controller

www.nyko.com

Price: \$39.99

Are you ever frustrated having to stop in the middle of your heated online gaming session, forced to interrupt the flow of play to fumble for your keyboard and pound out a message to your teammates? With the new Nyko iType2 Controller for PlayStation 2, those days are now over. Officially licensed by Sony, the iType2 allows you to chat, share information and develop online societies with other players via live instant messaging—with no interruptions to gameplay. The innovative controller's featured mini-keyboard design is the first of its kind to be built directly into the analog controller, which offers the same precision button design and vibration support you've become accustomed to on the PlayStation 2. With the iType2, there is now no need to learn the awkward keyboard-only method of gameplay PC gamers are used to.

Air conditioned pointing device

Nyko Air Flo Mouse

www.nyko.com

Price: \$29.99

Introducing the first-ever Air Flo Mouse for the PC. Based on the successful line of Air Flo controllers, the Air Flo Mouse is designed with a built-in fan that filters cool air through systematically designed pores on the outer shell. This unique design provides a cooling sensation that makes both PC gaming and general computer use a more comfortable experience. Special features built into the unit include variable air flow intensity, a high-quality optical sensor for more precise gameplay, sleek ergonomic design with rubber grips and dual-button design.



artificial

but not intelligent

King of Fighters Mai and Mary

To say that these 7-inch KOF PVCs are perfection would be an understatement, seeing how for the first time they've sculpted the naughty bits in motion. \$12.99; available January. www.toycom.net



Rurouni Kenshin

These 4-inch Kenshin PVCs, due out in February, exhibit a level of Kenshinness truly commendable for their diminutive stature. Make them yours for the low-low price of \$5.99. www.toycom.net

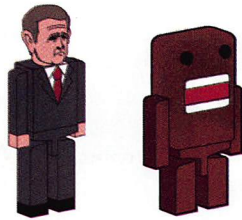
.hack//SIGN

Mimiru and Subaru from .hack; six inches of fully articulated virtual plastique. \$11.99; February. www.toycom.net





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Baka Gaijin. Two words a foreigner living in Japan learns pretty quickly are *baka* (stupid) and *gaijin* (foreigner). We put these words together on a bizarre shirt just for you. Dare to be stupid with this unique Japanese message!



"It is forbidden to..." Series. We love to come up with bizarre Japanese slogans for our T-shirts. One of our most esoteric are the "It is forbidden to..." series shirts, which give really helpful advice on what to avoid doing in Japan (do not urinate in public, do not commit *seppuku*, and so on).



Beware of Perverts. Men touching women on trains is a big problem in Japan, and there actually are signs that say "Beware of perverts" (*Chikan chui*). Our wacky T-shirt is sure to get you lots of attention, for better or worse. All sizes are in stock for your ordering convenience.



Emergency Exit. If you've ever been to Japan, you've seen the green Emergency Exit signs over every doorway. This is such a unique symbol of the country that we thought we'd capture it on a wacky T-shirt. Universally recognizable by all Japanese, and it looks really cool!



Hoodies and Girls' Shirts. Enjoy our wacky Japanese messages in the colder months with long-sleeved shirts and hoodies, both fashionable and very warm. Also, we have selected shirt designs available in fitted girls' sizes that will enhance all the right lines.



No Tattoos Allowed. In Japanese public baths, there's always a sign stating that customers with tattoos (e.g. *yakuza*) are not allowed in. We loved this wacky concept so much, we've captured it on a 100% cotton T-shirt for you — guaranteed to set you apart in a crowd!

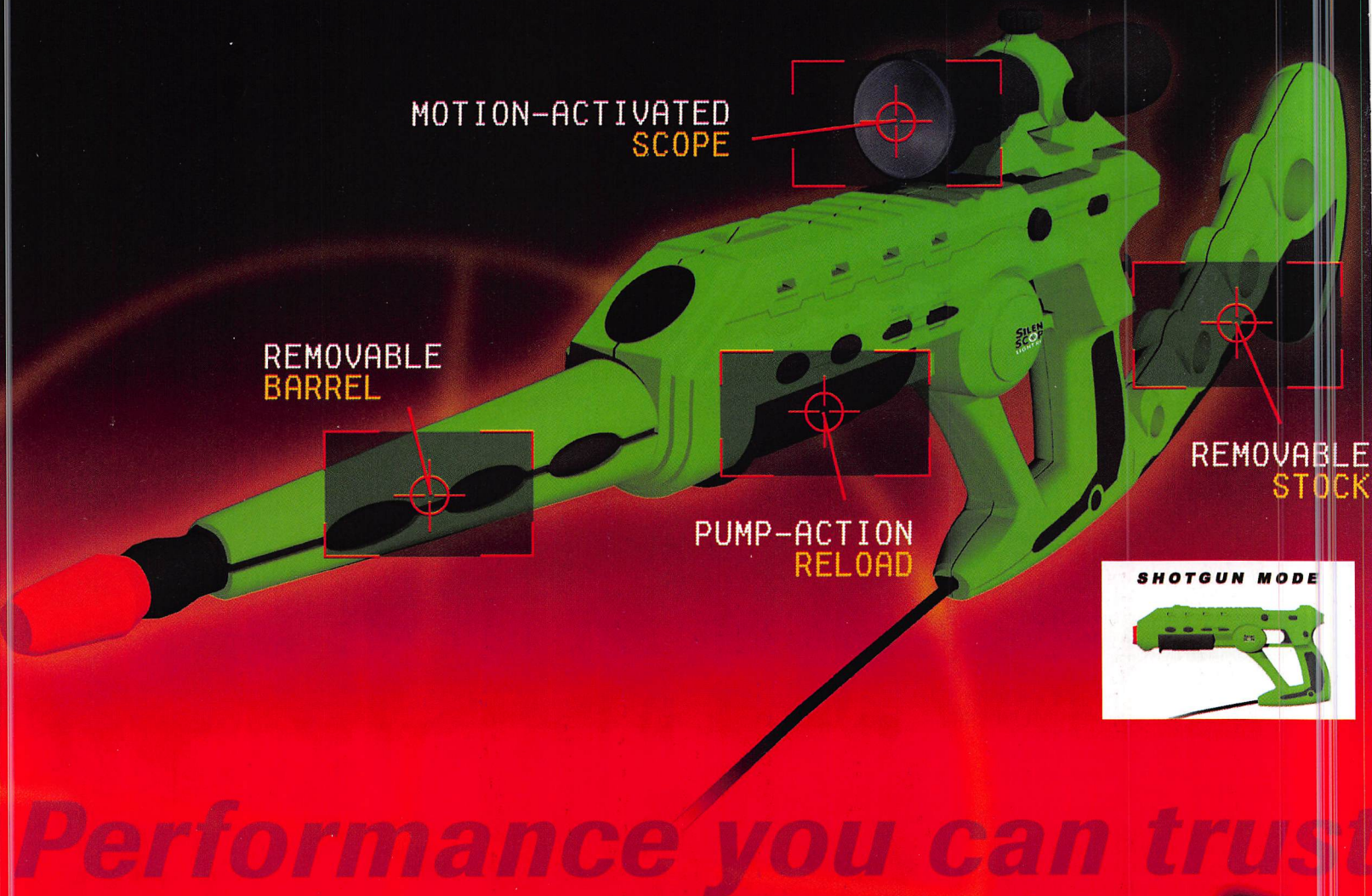
J-List is a special place on the world wide web where you can find rare and unique items from Japan. J-List carries both adult and non-adult products, carefully separated into two separate websites. In addition to our world-famous wacky Japanese T-shirts above, you can find:

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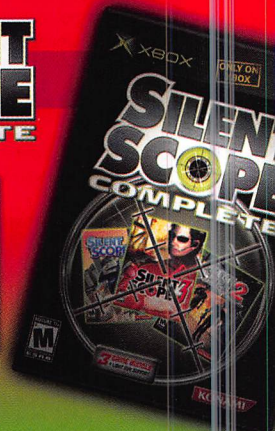
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